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Restlessness gives wings to the imagination.

MAURICE GILLIAMS

It is written, 'I am making all things new!'
But the chords are a clothesline of grief,
Razor-sharp gusts snap the faith
Of he who would flee this cruel start.
Ice rain beats blossom to a glassy pulp,
A cur shakes his pelt bone-dry in the violence.

from THE COLLECTED POEMS
OF JAN WOLKERS (2008)

PART I

1

I was ten and stopped taking off my coat. That morning, Mum had covered us one by one in udder ointment to protect us from the cold. It came out of a yellow Bogena tin and was normally used to prevent dairy cows' teats from getting cracks, calluses and cauliflower-like lumps. The tin's lid was so greasy you could only screw it off with a tea-towel. It smelled of stewed udder, the thick slices I'd sometimes find cooking in a pan of stock on our stove, sprinkled with salt and pepper. They filled me with horror, just like the reeking ointment on my skin. Mum pressed her fat fingers into our faces like the round cheeses she patted to check whether the rind was ripening. Our pale cheeks shone in the light of the kitchen bulb, which was encrusted with fly shit. For years we'd been planning to get a lampshade, a pretty one with flowers, but whenever we saw one in the village, Mum could never make up her mind. She'd been doing this for three years now. That morning, two days before Christmas, I felt her slippery thumbs in my eye sockets and for a moment I was afraid she'd press too hard, that my eyeballs would plop into my skull like marbles, and she'd say, 'That's what happens when your eyes are always roaming and you never keep them still like a true believer, gazing up at God as though the heavens might break open at any moment.' But

the heavens here only broke open for a snowstorm – nothing to keep staring at like an idiot.

In the middle of the breakfast table there was a woven bread-basket lined with a napkin decorated with Christmas angels. They were holding trumpets and twigs of mistletoe protectively in front of their willies. Even if you held the napkin up to the light of the bulb you couldn't see what they looked like – my guess was rolled-up slices of luncheon meat. Mum had arranged the bread neatly on the napkin: white, wholemeal with poppy seeds, and currant loaf. She'd used a sieve to carefully sprinkle icing sugar onto the crispy back of the loaf, like the first light snow that had fallen onto the backs of the blazed cows in the meadow before we drove them inside. The bread-bag's plastic clip was kept on top of the biscuit tin: we'd lose it otherwise and Mum didn't like the look of a knot in a plastic bag.

'Meat or cheese first before you go for the sweet stuff,' she'd always say. This was the rule and it would make us big and strong, as big as the giant Goliath and as strong as Samson in the Bible. We always had to drink a large glass of fresh milk as well; it had usually been out of the tank for a couple of hours and was lukewarm, and sometimes there was a yellowish layer of cream that stuck to the top of your mouth if you drank too slowly. The best thing was to gulp down the whole glass of milk with your eyes closed, something Mum called 'irreverent' although there's nothing in the Bible about drinking milk slowly, or about eating a cow's body. I took a slice of white bread from the basket and put it on my plate upside down

so that it looked just like a pale toddler's bum, even more convincing when partly spread with chocolate spread, which never failed to amuse me and my brothers, and they'd always say, 'Are you arse-licking again?'

'If you put goldfish in a dark room for too long they go really pale,' I whispered to Matthies, putting six slices of cooked sausage on my bread so that they covered it perfectly. *You've got six cows and two of them get eaten. How many are left?* I heard the teacher's voice inside my head every time I ate something. Why those stupid sums were combined with food – apples, cakes, pizzas and biscuits – I didn't know, but in any case the teacher had given up hope that I'd ever be able to do sums, that my exercise book would ever be pristine white without a single red underscore. It had taken me a year to learn to tell the time – Dad had spent hours with me at the kitchen table with the school's practice clock which he'd sometimes thrown on the floor in despair, at which point the mechanism would bounce out and the annoying thing would just keep on ringing – and even now when I looked at a clock the arms would still sometimes turn into the earthworms we dug out of the ground behind the cowshed with a fork to use as fishing bait. They wriggled every which way when you held them between forefinger and thumb and didn't calm down until you gave them a couple of taps, and then they'd lie in your hand and look just like those sweet, red strawberry shoelaces from Van Luik's sweet-shop.

'It's rude to whisper in company,' said my little sister Hanna, who was sitting next to Obbe and opposite me at the kitchen

table. When she didn't like something, she'd move her lips from left to right.

'Some words are too big for your little ears; they won't fit in,' I said with my mouth full.

Obbe stirred his glass of milk boredly with his finger, held up a bit of skin and then quickly wiped it on the tablecloth. It stuck there like a whitish lump of snot. It looked horrible, and I knew there was a chance the tablecloth would be the other way around tomorrow, with the encrusted milk skin on my side. I would refuse to put my plate on the table. We all knew the paper serviettes were only there for decoration and that Mum smoothed them out and put them back in the kitchen drawer after breakfast. They weren't meant for our dirty fingers and mouths. Some part of me also felt bad at the thought of the angels being scrunched up in my fist like mosquitoes so that their wings broke, or having their white angel's hair dirtied with strawberry jam.

'I have to spend time outside because I look so pale,' Matthies whispered. He smiled and stuck his knife with utmost concentration into the white chocolate part of the Duo Penotti pot, so as not to get any of the milk chocolate bit on it. We only had Duo Penotti in the holidays. We'd been looking forward to it for days and now the Christmas holidays had begun, it was finally time. The best moment was when Mum pulled off the protective paper, cleaned the bits of glue from the edges and then showed us the brown and white patches, like the unique pattern on a newborn calf. Whoever had the best marks at school that week was allowed

the pot first. I was always the last to get a turn.

I slid backwards and forwards on my chair: my toes didn't quite reach the floor yet. What I wanted was to keep everyone safe indoors and spread them out across the farm like slices of cooked sausage. In the weekly roundup yesterday, about the South Pole, our teacher had said that some penguins go fishing and never come back. Even though we didn't live at the South Pole, it was cold here, so cold that the lake had frozen over and the cows' drinking troughs were full of ice.

We each had two pale blue freezer bags next to our breakfast plates. I held one up and gave my mother a questioning look.

'To put over your socks,' she said with a smile that made dimples in her cheeks. 'It will keep them warm and stop your feet getting wet.' Meanwhile, she was preparing breakfast for Dad who was helping a cow to calve; after each slice of bread, she'd slide the knife between her thumb and index finger until the butter reached the tips of her fingers, and then she'd scrape it off with the blunt side of the knife. Dad was probably sitting on a milking stool next to a cow taking off a bit of the beestings, clouds of breath and cigarette smoke rising up above its steaming back. I realized there weren't any freezer bags next to his plate: his feet were probably too big, in particular his left one which was deformed after an accident with a combine harvester when he was about twenty. Next to Mum on the table was the silver cheese scoop she used to assess the flavour of the cheeses she made in the mornings. Before she cut one open, she'd stick the cheese scoop into the middle, through the plastic layer, twist it twice and then slowly pull it out. And

she'd eat a piece of cumin cheese just the way she ate the white bread during communion at church, just as thoughtfully and devoutly, slow and staring. Obbe had once joked that Jesus' body was made of cheese, too, and that was why we were only allowed two slices on our bread each day, otherwise we'd run out of Him too quickly.

Once our mother had said the morning prayer and thanked God 'for poverty and for wealth; while many eat the bread of sorrows, Thou hast fed us mild and well,' Matthies pushed his chair back, hung his black leather ice skates around his neck, and put the Christmas cards in his pocket that Mum had asked him to put through the letterboxes of a few neighbours. He was going on ahead to the lake where he was going to take part in the local skating competition with a couple of his friends. It was a twenty-mile route, and the winner got a plate of stewed udders with mustard and a gold medal with the year 2000 on it. I wished I could put a freezer bag over his head, too, so that he'd stay warm for a long time, the seal closed around his neck. He ran his hand through my hair for a moment. I quickly smoothed it back into place and wiped a few crumbs from my pyjama top. Matthies always parted his hair in the middle and put gel in his front locks. They were like two curls of butter on a dish; Mum always made those around Christmas: butter from a tub wasn't very festive, she thought. That was for normal days and the day of Jesus' birth wasn't a normal day, not even if it happened every year all over again as if He died for our sins each year, which I found strange. I often thought to myself: that poor man has been dead a long time,

they must have forgotten by now. But better not to mention it, otherwise there wouldn't be any more sprinkle-covered biscuits and no one would tell the Christmas story of the three kings and the star in the East.

Matthies went into the hall to check his hair, even though it would turn rock hard in the freezing cold and his two curls would go flat and stick to his forehead.

'Can I come with you?' I asked. Dad had got my wooden skates out of the attic and strapped them to my shoes with their brown leather ties. I'd been walking around the farm in my skates for a few days, my hands behind my back and the protectors over the blades so they wouldn't leave marks on the floor. My calves were hard. I'd practised enough now to be able to go out onto the ice without a folding chair to push around.

'No, you can't,' he said. And then more quietly so that only I could hear it, 'Because we're going to the other side.'

'I want to go to the other side, too,' I whispered.

'I'll take you with me when you're older.' He put on his woolly hat and smiled. I saw his braces with their zigzagging blue elastic bands.

'I'll be back before dark,' he called to Mum. He turned around once again in the doorway and waved to me, the scene I'd keep replaying in my mind later until his arm no longer raised itself and I began to doubt whether we had even said goodbye.

2

We didn't have any of the commercial channels, only Nederland 1, 2 and 3. Dad said there wasn't any nudity on them. He pronounced the word 'nudity' as though a fruit fly had just flown into his mouth – he spat as he said it. The word mainly made me think of the potatoes whose jackets my mother peeled off every evening before she dropped them into the water – that plopping sound they made. I can imagine if you think about naked people for too long shoots grow out of you, just like potatoes sprout after a while so you have to dig them out of the soft flesh with the point of a knife. We fed the forked green bits to the chickens, who were crazy about them. I lay on my stomach in front of the oak cabinet that hid the TV. One of the buckles of my skates had rolled under it when I'd kicked them off angrily in the corner of the living room. I was too young for the other side and too old to skate on the manure ditch behind the cowsheds. To be honest, you couldn't even call it skating – it was more a kind of shuffling, like the way the geese that landed there in search of something edible shuffled. The stench of manure broke free with every score in the ice and the blades of your skates turned light brown. We must have been a ridiculous sight standing there on the ditch like a pair of silly geese, our bundled-up bodies

waggling from one grassy bank to the other, instead of joining in the skate on the big lake with everyone else from the village.

'We can't go and watch Matthies,' Dad had said, 'one of the calves has got the runs.'

'But you promised,' I cried. I'd even wrapped my feet in the freezer bags.

'Mitigating circumstances,' Dad said, pulling his black beret down over his eyebrows. I'd nodded a couple of times. There was nothing we could do about unforeseen circumstances and no one stood a chance against the cows anyway; they were always more important. Even when they didn't require any attention – even when their fat clumsy bodies were lying sated in the stalls – they still managed to take priority. I'd folded my arms in a sulk. All that practising in my strap-on skates had been for nothing; my calves were even harder than the porcelain Jesus in the hall that was as big as Dad. I deliberately threw the freezer bags in the bin, and pushed them deep into the coffee grounds and bread crusts so that Mum wouldn't be able to reuse them like the serviettes.

It was dusty under the cabinet. I found a hairclip, a dried-up raisin and a Lego block. Mum shut the cabinet doors whenever family members or the elders from the Reformed church came to visit. They mustn't see that we allowed ourselves to be diverted from God's path in the evenings. On Mondays, Mum always watched a quiz show called *Lingo*. We all had to be as quiet as mice so that she could guess the words from behind the ironing board; we'd hear the iron hissing at each correct answer, steam spiralling up. They were usually words

that weren't in the Bible, but our mother still seemed to know them. She called them 'blush words' because some of them turned your cheeks red. Obbe once told me that when the screen was black, the television was the eye of God, and that when Mum closed the doors she wanted Him not to see us. She was probably ashamed of us because we sometimes used blush words when *Lingo* wasn't on. She tried to wash them out of our mouths with a bar of green soap, like the grease and mud stains from our good school clothes.

I felt around the floor for the buckle. From where I was lying, I could see into the kitchen. Dad's green wellies suddenly appeared in front of the fridge, bits of straw and cow shit sticking to their sides. He must have come in to fetch another bunch of carrot tops from the vegetable drawer. He'd cut the leaves off with the hoof-paring knife he kept in the breast pocket of his overalls. For days he'd been walking back and forth between the fridge and the rabbit hutches. The cream slice that was left from Hanna's seventh birthday went with him – I'd been drooling over it every time the fridge was open. I hadn't been able to resist secretly scooping off a corner of the pink icing with my fingernail and putting it in my mouth. I'd made a tunnel in the cream that had thickened in the fridge and stuck to my fingertip like a yellow hat. Dad didn't notice. 'Once he's got his mind set on something, there's no budging him,' my granny on the most religious side of the family sometimes said, and that was why I suspected he was feeding up my rabbit Dieuwertje, which I'd got from Lien next door, for the big Christmas dinner in two days' time. He never normally

got involved with the rabbits – 'small stock' belonged on your plate and he only liked animals whose presence filled his entire field of vision, but my rabbit didn't even fill the half of it. He'd once said that the neck vertebrae were the most breakable part of a body – I heard them snapping in my head as though my mother was breaking a handful of raw vermicelli above the pan – and a rope with a noose in it had recently appeared in the attic, hanging from the rafters. 'It's for a swing,' Dad said, but there was still no swing. I didn't understand why the rope was hanging in the attic and not in the shed with the screwdrivers and his collection of bolts. Maybe, I thought, Dad wanted us to watch; maybe it would happen if we sinned. I briefly pictured my rabbit hanging broken-necked from the rope in the attic, behind Matthies's bed, so that our father could skin it more easily. It would probably come off the same way as the skin from the big cooked sausage that Mum peeled with her potato knife in the mornings: only they'd put Dieuwertje in a layer of butter in the big casserole dish on the gas stove, and the whole house would smell of broiled rabbit. All of us Mulders would be able to smell from afar that Christmas dinner was ready to be served; we'd know not to spoil our appetite. I'd noticed that while I used to have to be sparing with the feed, I was now allowed to give my rabbit a whole scoopful, as well as the carrot tops. Despite the fact that he was a buck, I'd named him after the curly-haired female presenter on children's TV because I found her so pretty. I wanted to put her at the top of my Christmas list, but I waited a while as I hadn't seen her in any of the toy catalogues yet.

There was more going on than plain generosity towards my rabbit, I was sure of it. This was why I'd suggested other animals when I'd joined Dad bringing in the cows for their winter treatment before breakfast. I was holding a stick to drive them. The best thing to do was to whack their flanks so they'd walk on.

'Other children in my class are having duck, pheasant or turkey, and you fill them with potatoes, leek, onions and beets, stuffed up their bums until they're overflowing.'

I glanced at my dad and he nodded. There were various kinds of nods in our village. That in itself was a way of differentiating yourself. I knew them all by now. This was the nod that dad used for the cattle dealers when they offered him a price that was too low but that he had to accept, because there was something wrong with the poor creature and he'd be saddled with it for good otherwise.

'Plenty of pheasants here, especially among the willows,' I said, glancing at the overgrown area to the left of the farm. I saw them there sometimes in the trees or sitting on the ground. When they saw me, they'd let themselves drop to the ground like a stone and would stay there playing dead until I'd gone. That's when their heads would pop up again.

Dad had nodded again, whacked his stick against the ground and hissed, '*Sssssssjeu*, come on,' at the cows to drive them on. I'd looked in the freezer after that chat but there was no duck, pheasant or turkey to be found among the packets of mixed mincemeat and vegetables for soup.

Dad's boots disappeared from sight again, and only a few

strands of straw remained behind on the kitchen floor. I put the buckle in my pocket and went upstairs in my stockinged feet to my bedroom, which overlooked the farmyard. I sat on my haunches on the edge of the bed, and thought about my father's hand on my head when we'd brought in the cows and walked back to the meadow to check the mole-traps. If they were empty, Dad would keep his hands stiffly in his trouser pockets: there was nothing that deserved a reward, not like when we'd caught something and had to prise the twisted, bloodied bodies from the claws with a rusty screw-driver, which I did bent over so that Dad couldn't see the tears running down my cheeks at the sight of a small creature that had walked unsuspectingly into a trap. I pictured the way Dad would use that hand to wring my rabbit's neck, like the child-proof top of a canister of nitrogen: there was only one right way to do it. I imagined Mum laying out my lifeless pet on the silver dish she used for Russian salad on Sundays after church. She'd display him on a bed of lamb's lettuce and garnish him with gherkins, tomato chunks, grated carrot and a sprig of thyme. I looked at my hands, at their irregular lines. They were still too small to be used for anything other than holding stuff. They still fitted in my parents' hands but Mum's and Dad's didn't fit in mine. That was the difference between them and me – they could put theirs around a rabbit's neck, or around a cheese that had just been flipped in its brine. Their hands were always searching for something and if you were no longer able to hold an animal or a person tenderly, it was better to let go and turn your attention to other useful things instead.

I pressed my forehead harder and harder against the edge of my bed; I felt the pressure of cold wood on my skin and closed my eyes. Sometimes I found it strange that you had to pray in the dark, although maybe it was like my glow-in-the-dark duvet: the stars and the planets only emitted light and protected you from the night when it was dark enough. God must work the same way. I let my intertwined hands rest on my knees. Angrily I thought about Matthies who'd be drinking hot chocolate from one of the stalls on the ice. I thought of him skating with red cheeks, and about the thaw that would start tomorrow: the curly-haired presenter had warned of roofs that might be too slippery for Saint Nicholas to get down the chimney, and mist which might lead him to get lost and perhaps Matthies too, even though it was his own fault. For a moment, I saw my skates before me, greased and back in their box, ready to be returned to the attic. I thought about being too small for so much, but that no one told you when you were big enough, how many centimetres on the door-post that was, and I asked God if He please couldn't take my brother Matthies instead of my rabbit. 'Amen.'

3

'But he's not dead,' Mum said to the vet. She got up from the edge of the bath and extricated her hand from a pale blue flannel. She'd been just about to clean Hanna's bottom, otherwise there was a chance she'd get worms. They made little holes in you like in cabbage leaves. I was old enough to make sure I didn't get worms, and I wrapped my arms around my knees to look less naked now the vet had suddenly come into the bathroom without knocking.

In a hurried voice, he said, 'Just by the far side, the ice was much too weak because of the navigation channels. He'd been in front for a long time, everyone had lost sight of him.' I knew instantly this wasn't about my rabbit that was sitting in its hutch as usual, gnawing at carrot tops. And the vet sounded serious. He often came into the house to talk about the cows. Not many people came here who didn't come to talk about the cows, but this time something wasn't right. He hadn't even mentioned the cattle once, not even when he actually meant us – the children – when he asked how the livestock was doing. When he hung his head, I stretched my upper body to be able to see through the little window above the bath. It was already starting to get dark: a group of deacons wearing black were approaching, closer and closer until they'd

wrap their arms around us, arriving each day to bring the night in person. I told myself that Matthies had lost track of time: it wouldn't be unusual for him and that's why our father had given him a watch with a luminous dial, which he was probably accidentally wearing upside down – or was he still delivering the Christmas cards?

I let myself sink back into the bath-water and rested my chin on my damp arms, peering through my eyelashes at my mother. We'd recently had a brush-like draught-excluder added to the letterbox in the front door so that we'd stop feeling the wind inside the house. I sometimes peeked through it to the outdoors and now I was looking through my eyelashes, I got the idea that Mum and the vet hadn't realized I was listening in: that in my thoughts I could erase the lines around my mother's eyes and mouth because they didn't belong there, and press dimples into her cheeks with my thumbs. My mother wasn't the nodding sort; she had too much to say for that, but now she only nodded and for the first time I thought: please say something, Mum, even if it's about tidying up, about the calves that have got the runs again, the weather forecast for the coming days, the bedroom doors that keep jamming, our ungrateful attitude, or the dried-up toothpaste at the corners of our mouths. She said nothing and looked at the flannel she was holding. The vet pulled the step-stool out from under the sink and sat down on it. It creaked under his weight.

'Evertsen pulled him out of the lake.' He paused for a moment, looked from Obbe to me and then added, 'Your brother is dead.' I looked away from him, at the towels hanging

from the hook next to the sink that were stiff from the cold. I wanted the vet to get up and say it was all a mistake, that cows are not that much different from sons: even if they go into the big wide world they always return to their stalls before sunset to be fed.

'He's out skating and he'll be back soon,' Mum said.

She squeezed the flannel into a ball above the bath-water; the drips made rings. Mum bumped against my raised knees. To give myself something to do, I floated a Lego boat on the waves my sister Hanna made. She hadn't understood what had just been said and I realized that I could also pretend my ears were blocked, that they'd been tied in a permanent knot. The bath-water began to get tepid and before I knew it, I'd peed. I looked at pee that was ochre yellow and billowing into cloud-like swirls before mixing with the water. Hanna didn't notice, otherwise she'd have jumped up immediately with a shriek and called me a dirty girl. She was holding a Barbie above the surface of the water. 'She'll drown otherwise,' she said. The doll was wearing a stripy swimsuit. I'd once put my finger under it to feel the plastic tits, and no one had noticed. They felt harder than the cyst on my dad's chin. I looked at Hanna's naked body which was the same as mine. Only Obbe's was different. He was standing next to the bath, still dressed; he'd just been telling us about a computer game in which he had to shoot people who burst apart like big tomatoes. He was going to use the bath-water after us. I knew he had a little tap he could pee from down below and under it was a wattle like a turkey's. Sometimes I worried that he had something hanging

there that nobody talked about. Maybe he was dangerously ill. Mum called it a winkle, but maybe it was actually called cancer and she didn't want to frighten us because my granny on the less religious side had died of cancer. Just before she'd died, she'd made eggnog. Dad said the cream had curdled when they found her, that everything curdled when somebody died, unexpectedly or not, and for weeks I hadn't been able to sleep because I kept seeing Granny's face in her coffin, her half-opened mouth, eye sockets and pores beginning to ooze eggnog as thin as yolk.

Mum pulled me and Hanna out of the bath by our upper arms, her fingers leaving white marks on our skin. Usually she'd wrap towels around us and check whether we were fully dry at the end so that we didn't start to rust, or worse, grow mould like the cracks between the bathroom tiles, but now she left us, teeth chattering, on the bath-mat, soap-suds still in my armpits.

'Dry yourself properly,' I whispered to my shivering sister as I passed her a rock-hard towel, 'otherwise we'll have to descale you later.' I bent down to check my toes which is where the mould would start first, and this way no one could see that my cheeks were bright red, like two Fireball gobstoppers. *If a boy and a rabbit take part in a race, how many miles per hour does one of them have to go faster to win?* I heard the teacher inside my head say, as he stabbed his pointer into my stomach, forcing me to reply. After my toes, I quickly checked my fingertips – Dad sometimes joked that our skin would come loose if we stayed in the bath for too long and that he'd nail it

to the wooden wall of the shed, next to the pelts of the skinned rabbits. When I stood up again and wrapped the towel around myself, Dad suddenly appeared beside the vet. He was shaking and there were snowflakes on the shoulders of his overalls; his face looked deathly pale. Again and again he blew into his cupped hands. At first I thought about the avalanche our teacher had told us about, even though you surely never get them in the Dutch countryside. I only realized it couldn't be an avalanche when Dad began to cry, and Obbe moved his head from left to right like a windscreen wiper to get rid of his tears.

At Mum's request, our neighbour Lien took down the Christmas tree that very evening. I was sitting on the sofa with Obbe, hiding behind the happy faces of Bert and Ernie on my pyjama top, though my own fears towered over them. I kept the fingers of both hands crossed, like you do in the school playground when you've said something you don't mean, or want to undo your promises, or your prayers. We looked on sadly as the tree was carried from the room, leaving behind a trail of glitter and pine needles. It was only then that I felt a stab in my chest, more than at the vet's news. Matthies was sure to return but the Christmas tree wouldn't. A few days earlier, we'd been allowed to decorate the tree with tiny fat Santas, shiny balls, angels and chains of beads, and wreath-shaped chocolates, all to the tune of 'Jimmy' by Boudewijn de Groot. We knew the lyrics off by heart and would sing along, looking forward to the lines containing words we weren't allowed to use. Now we watched through the living room window as Lien

used a wheelbarrow to dump the tree at the side of the road, wrapped in an orange tarpaulin. Only the silver star was left sticking out; they'd forgotten to take it off. I didn't mention it, as what was the point of a star if we didn't have a tree any more? Lien rearranged the orange tarpaulin a couple of times as though it might alter our view, our situation. Not long ago, Matthies had pushed me around in the same wheelbarrow. I'd had to use both hands to hold on to the sides that were covered in a thin layer of dried manure. I noticed at the time that his back had become more crooked through the hard work, as though he was working his way down to the earth. My brother had suddenly broken into a sprint, causing me to be thrown up higher and higher at every bump. It should have been the other way round, I thought now. I should have pushed Matthies around the farmyard while making engine sounds, even though he'd have been much too heavy to dump at the side of the road afterwards and cover in the orange tarpaulin like the dead calves, so that he could be collected and we could forget him. The next day he'd be born again and there'd be nothing that made this evening any different from all the other evenings.

'The angels are naked,' I whispered to Obbe.

They lay on the dresser in front of us next to the chocolate stars that had melted in their jackets. These angels didn't have trumpets or mistletoe in front of their winkles. Dad couldn't have noticed that they weren't wearing any clothes otherwise he'd certainly have put them back in their silver paper. I'd once broken the wings off an angel to see whether they'd grow back.

God could surely make that happen. I wanted some kind of sign that He existed and that He was there for us during the daytime too. This seemed sensible to me because then he could keep an eye on things, and look after Hanna, and keep the cows free of milk fever and udder infections. When nothing happened and the broken-off white patch remained visible, I buried the angel in the vegetable patch between a couple of leftover red onions.

'Angels are always naked,' Obbe whispered back. He still hadn't had a bath and he had a towel around his neck; he held on to both ends as though he was ready for a fight. The bath-water with my pee in it must have been stone cold by now.

'Don't they catch cold?'

'They're cold-blooded, just like snakes and water fleas, and then you don't need clothes.'

I nodded but quickly laid my hand over the porcelain willy of one of the angels as a precaution when Lien from next door came in. I heard her in the hall wiping her feet for longer than normal. From now on, every visitor to the house would wipe their feet for longer than necessary. I learned that at first, death requires people to pay attention to small details – the way Mum checks her nails for dried-up bits of rennet from making cheese – to delay the pain. For a moment I hoped Lien had Matthies with her, that he'd been hiding in the hollow tree at the top of the meadow and that he'd had enough of it now and had come out again; the temperature had dropped below freezing outside. Ice would be closing over the holes caused by the wind: my brother wouldn't be able to find a way out from

under it and would have to look around the whole lake on his own in the pitch dark. Even the construction lamp at the skating club had gone out by now. When Lien had finished wiping her feet, she talked to Mum, so quietly I couldn't hear. I only saw her lips moving and my mother's pursed shut, like mating slugs. I let my hand slide off the angel's willy when no one was paying attention and watched Mum go to the kitchen, pushing another hair-grip into her bun. She put in more and more, as though she was trying to fix her head so that it wouldn't suddenly flip open and reveal everything that was happening inside it. She came back with the Christmas biscuits. We'd bought them at the market together. I'd been looking forward to their brittle interiors, to the crunch of the sprinkles, but Mum gave them to Lien, as well as the rice pudding from the fridge and the rolled meat that Dad had got from the butcher's, and even the eighty-metre-long roll of red and white string to tie up the meat. We could have wrapped the string around our bodies so that they didn't fall apart in slices. Later I sometimes thought that this was when the emptiness began. It wasn't because of Matthies's death but those two days of Christmas that were given away in pans and empty Russian salad tubs.

4

The coffin with my brother in it was in the front room. It was made of oak and had a viewing window above his face, and metal handles. He'd been there for three days. On the first day, Hanna had rapped on the glass with her knuckles and said, in a small voice, 'Now, I've had enough of this – stop messing around, Matthies.' She remained motionless for a moment as though she was afraid he might be whispering and she wouldn't hear him if there wasn't total silence. When there was no reply, she went back to playing with her dolls behind the sofa, her thin body trembling like a dragonfly. I'd wanted to take her between my finger and thumb and blow on her to keep her warm, but I couldn't tell her that Matthies had gone to sleep forever, that from now on we'd only have viewing windows in our hearts with our brother laid out behind them. Apart from our granny on the less religious side, we didn't know anyone who was asleep for all eternity, though in the end we all got up again. 'We live according to God's will,' Granny on the more religious side often said about this. When she got up in the morning her stiff knees troubled her, as well as bad breath, 'as though I'd swallowed a dead sparrow'. Neither that bird nor my brother would ever wake up again.

The coffin was on the dresser on a white crocheted cloth

that was usually taken out for birthdays when there would be cheese sticks, nuts, glasses and punch laid out on it, and just like at the parties, people stood in a ring around it now, their noses pressed into hankies or other people's necks. Although they said nice things about my brother, death still felt ugly and as indigestible as the lost tiger nut we found days after a birthday party behind a chair or under the TV cabinet. In the coffin, Matthies's face looked like it was made of beeswax, so smooth and tight. The nurses had stuck tissue paper under his eyelids to keep them shut, while I'd have preferred them to be open so that we could look at each other one more time, so that I could be sure I didn't forget the colour of his eyes, so that he wouldn't forget me.

When the second group of people had left, I tried to spread open his eyes, which made me think of the paper nativity scene I'd made at school, with coloured tissue paper as stained glass and Mary and Joseph figures. At the Christmas breakfast, a tea light had been lit behind them so the tissue paper would light up and Jesus could be born in an illuminated stable. But my brother's eyes were dull and grey and there wasn't a stained glass pattern. I quickly let the eyelids drop again and closed the viewing window. They'd tried to replicate his gelled locks but they just hung on his forehead like brown wilted pea pods. Mum and Granny had dressed Matthies in a pair of jeans and his favourite sweater, the blue and green one with HEROES in big letters across the chest. Most of the heroes I'd read about in books could fall from tall buildings or find themselves in an inferno and end up with just a few scratches.

I didn't understand why Matthies couldn't do this too and why he'd only be immortal in our thoughts from now on. He'd once rescued a heron from the combine harvester just in time, otherwise the bird would have been shredded, added to a bale of straw and fed to the cows.

From behind the door where I was hiding, as she was dressing his body, I'd heard Granny tell my brother, 'You always have to swim to the dark patch. You knew that, didn't you?' I couldn't imagine how you managed to swim to the dark patch myself. It was about differences in colour. When there was snow on the ice you had to look for the light, but when there wasn't any snow, the ice would be lighter than the hole and you had to swim to the dark. Matthies had told me this himself when he'd come into my bedroom before skating and shown me in his socks how to slide your feet toward and away from each other in turn. 'Like riding two fish,' he said. I had watched from my bed and made a clicking sound with my tongue against the roof of my mouth, the way the skates sounded on television as they went across ice. We loved that sound. Now my tongue lay curled in my mouth like an increasingly dangerous navigation channel in a lake. I didn't dare make clicking sounds any more.

Granny came into the front room with a bottle of liquid soap – maybe that's why they'd put papers under his eyelids, so that the soap wouldn't get in and sting. Once they'd tidied him up, they'd probably take them away again, like the tea light in my nativity scene which was blown out so that Mary and Joseph could get on with their lives. Granny pulled me

to her chest for a moment. She smelled of beestings pancakes with ham and syrup: there was still a big pile of them on the counter left over from lunch, greasy with butter, their edges crispy. Dad had asked who had made a face of bramble jam, raisins and apple on his pancake, looking at each of us one by one. His eyes stopped at Granny who smiled at him just as cheerfully as his pancake.

'The poor lad is laid out nicely.'

More and more brown patches were appearing on her face, like the apples she'd cut up and used as mouths on the pancakes. You get overripe from old age in the end.

'Can't we put a rolled-up pancake in there with him? It's Matthies's favourite food.'

'That would only smell. Do you want to attract worms?'

I removed my head from her breast and looked at the angels that were on the second step of the stairs in a box, ready to be taken back to the attic. I'd been allowed to put them back in the silver paper, one by one, facing downwards. I still hadn't cried. I'd tried but hadn't been able to each time, not even if I tried to picture Matthies falling through the ice in great detail: his hand feeling the ice for the hole, looking for the light or the dark, his clothes and skates heavy under the water. I held my breath and didn't even manage it for half a minute.

'No,' I said, 'I hate those stupid worms.'

Granny smiled at me. I wanted her to stop smiling, I wanted Dad to take his fork to her face and mash up everything like he'd done with his pancake. I didn't hear her muffled sobs until she was alone in the front room.

In the nights that followed, I kept sneaking downstairs to check whether my brother was really dead. First I'd lie in my bed wiggling around or 'making a candle', as I called it, by throwing my legs up in the air and supporting my hips with my hands. In the mornings his death seemed obvious but as soon as it grew dark, I'd begin to have my doubts. What if we hadn't looked hard enough and he woke up under the ground? Each time, I'd hope that God had changed his mind and hadn't listened to me when I'd prayed for him to protect Dieuwertje, just like the time – I must have been about seven – when I'd asked for a new bike: a red one with at least seven gears, and a soft saddle with double suspension so that I didn't get a pain in my crotch when I had to cycle home from school into the wind. I never got the bike. If I went downstairs now, I hoped, it wouldn't be Matthies lying beneath the sheet but my rabbit. Of course I'd be sad, but it would be different from the beating veins in my forehead when I tried to hold my breath in bed to understand death, or when I made the candle for so long my blood ran to my head like candlewax. Finally, I let my legs drop back onto my mattress and carefully opened my bedroom door. I tiptoed onto the landing and down the stairs. Dad had beaten me to it: through the banisters I saw him sitting on a chair next to the coffin, his head on the glass of the viewing window. I looked down at his messy blond hair that always smelled of cows, even when he'd just had a bath. I looked at his bent body. He was shaking; as he wiped his nose on his pyjama top, I thought how the fabric would become hard with snot, just like my coat sleeves. I looked at

him and began to feel little stabs inside my chest. I imagined I was watching Nederland 1, 2 or 3 and could zap away at any moment if it got too much. Dad sat there for so long my feet got cold. When he pushed his chair in and returned to bed – my parents had a waterbed that Dad would sink back into now – I descended the rest of the stairs and sat down on his chair. It was still warm. I pressed my mouth to the window, like the ice in my dreams, and blew. I tasted the salt of my father's tears. Matthies's face was as pale as fennel; his lips were purple from the cooling mechanism that kept him frozen. I wanted to turn it off so that he could thaw in my arms and I could carry him upstairs so that we could sleep on it, like Dad sometimes ordered us to when we'd misbehaved and been sent to bed without any dinner. I'd ask him whether this was really the right way to leave us.

The first night he was in the coffin in the front room, Dad saw me sitting with my hands around the banisters and my head pushed through them. He'd sniffed and said, 'They've put cotton wads in his bottom to stop his crap coming out. He must still be warm inside. That makes me feel better.' I held my breath and counted: thirty-three seconds of suffocation. It wouldn't be long before I could hold my breath for so long that I'd be able to fish Matthies out of his sleep, and just like the frogspawn we got out of the ditch behind the cowshed with a fishing net and kept in a bucket until they were tadpoles and tails and legs slowly began to grow out of them, Matthies would also slowly transform from lifeless to alive and kicking.

*

On the morning of the third day, Dad asked from the bottom of the stairs whether I wanted to go with him to Farmer Janssen's to pick up some mangels and drop them off at the new bit of land. I would have preferred to stay with my brother so that I could be certain he didn't thaw in my absence, melting out of our life like a snowflake, but I didn't want to disappoint him so I put on my red coat over my overalls, the zip done up to my chin. The tractor was so old I was shaken back and forth at every bump; I had to cling on to the edge of the open window. Anxiously I glanced over at my father: the lines of sleep were still on his face, the waterbed made rivers in his skin, an impression of the lake. Mum's bobbing body had stopped him from sleeping, as had his own bobbing body, or the idea of bodies heaving as they fell into water. Tomorrow they'd buy a normal mattress. My stomach rumbled.

'I need to poo.'

'Why didn't you go at home?'

'I didn't need to then.'

'That's impossible, you feel it coming on.'

'But it's the truth. I think I've got the runs.'

Dad parked the tractor on the land, turned off the engine, and reached over to push open my door for me.

'Squat down over by that tree, the ash there.'

I quickly climbed out of the cab, pulled off my coat and let my overalls and pants drop to my knees. I imagined the diarrhoea splattering onto the grass like the caramel sauce my granny poured onto the rice pudding, and squeezed my

buttocks together. Dad leaned against the tractor's tyre, lit up a cigarette and looked at me.

'If you take any longer, moles will start tunnelling up your bum hole.'

I began to sweat, picturing the cotton wads my dad had mentioned, the way the moles would burrow into my brother when he was buried, and the way they'd dig up everything in me afterwards. My poo belonged to me, but once it was between the blades of grass, it belonged to the world.

'Just push,' Dad said. He came over and handed me a used tissue. His eyes were hard. I wasn't used to this expression on him, even though I knew he hated waiting because then he had to stand still for too long, which made him dwell on things, and then he smoked more. No one in the village liked to dwell: the crops might wither, and we only knew about the harvest that came from the land, not about things that grew inside ourselves. I breathed in Dad's smoke so that his cares would become mine. After that, I said a quick prayer to God that he wouldn't give me cancer from the cigarette smoke if I helped with the toad migration when I was old enough. 'The righteous care for the needs of their livestock,' I'd once read in the Bible, so I was safe as far as illness was concerned.

'The urge went away,' I said. I pulled my pants back up and put my overalls back on, closed my coat and zipped it up to my chin. I could hold in my poo. I wouldn't have to lose anything I wanted to keep from now on.

Dad stamped out his butt on a molehill. 'Drink lots of water, that helps with the calves too. Otherwise it will come

out the other end one day.' He laid his hand on my head, and I tried to walk as upright as I could beneath it. Now there were two things I'd have to watch out for at both ends.

We walked back to the tractor. The new bit of land was older than me and yet it continued to be called that. It was like the way there used to be a doctor living at the bottom of the dike where there was now a playground with a bumpy slide, which we still called the Old Doctor's when arranging play dates.

'Do you think worms and maggots are going to eat Matthies?' I asked my father as we walked back. I didn't dare look at him. Dad had once read out from Isaiah, 'All your pomp has been brought down to the grave, along with the noise of your harps; maggots are spread out beneath you and worms cover you,' and now I was worried this would happen to my brother too. Dad tugged open the tractor's door without answering me. I feverishly pictured my brother's body full of holes like strawberry matting.

When we arrived at the mangels, some of them were rotten. The mushy white pulp that looked like pus stuck to my fingers when I picked them up. Dad tossed them nonchalantly over his shoulder into the trailer. They made a dull thud. Whenever he looked at me I felt my cheeks burning. We had to agree upon times when my parents couldn't look at me, I thought, the same as with the TV. Perhaps that was why Matthies didn't come home that day – because the doors to the TV cabinet were closed and no one was keeping an eye on us.

I didn't dare ask my father any more questions about

Matthies and threw the last mangel into the trailer, taking my place next to him in the cabin afterwards. There was a sticker on the rusty rim above the rearview mirror that said MILK THE COW, NOT THE FARMER.

Back at the farm, Dad and Obbe dragged the dark blue waterbed outside. Dad pulled off the nozzle and the safety cap and let the water drain out into the farmyard. It wasn't long before a thin layer of ice had formed. I didn't dare stand on it, afraid that I would fall through. The dark mattress slowly shrank like a vacuum-sealed packet of coffee. Then my father rolled up the waterbed and laid it at the side of the road, next to the wheelbarrow containing the Christmas tree that would be picked up on Monday by the waste disposal company. Obbe nudged me and said, 'There he is.' I stared at the place he was pointing to and saw the black hearse approaching over the dike; it came closer and closer like a large crow, then it turned left and drove onto the farm, across the layer of ice from the waterbed, which had indeed cracked. Reverend Renkema got out with two of my uncles. Dad had chosen them and Farmer Evertsen and Farmer Janssen to lift the oak coffin into the hearse and later carry it into the church as Hymn 416 was sung, accompanied by the band in which Matthies had played the trombone for years, and the only thing that was right about that afternoon was that heroes are always borne aloft.

PART II

I

From close up the warts on the toads look just like capers. I hate the taste of capers, those little green buds. And if you pop one between your thumb and index finger, some sourish stuff comes out, just like from a toad's poison gland. I poke at a toad's fleshy rump with a stick. There's a black stripe running down its back. It doesn't move. I push harder and watch the rough skin fold around the stick; for a moment its smooth belly touches the tarmac that has been warmed by the first rays of spring sun, where they love to squat.

'I only want to help you,' I whisper.

I put down the lantern they gave us at the Reformed church next to me on the road. It is white with sticking-out folds in the middle. 'God's word is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path,' Reverend Renkema had said as he handed them out to the children. It's not yet eight o'clock and my candle has already shrunk to half its size. I hope God's word isn't going to start fading too.

In the light of my lantern I see that the toad's front feet aren't webbed. Maybe a heron bit them off or he was born like that. Maybe it's like Dad's gammy leg that he drags around after him across the farmyard like one of those tube sandbags from the silage heap.

'There's squash and a Milky Way for everyone,' I hear a church volunteer say behind me. The thought of having to eat a Milky Way in a place where there are no toilets makes my stomach heave. You never know whether someone's sneezed onto the squash or spat in it or whether they've checked the sell-by dates of the Milky Ways. The chocolate layer around the malt nougat might have turned white, the same thing that happens to your face when food makes you sick. After that death will follow swiftly, I'm sure of that. I try to forget about the Milky Ways.

'If you don't hurry up, you won't just have a stripe along your back but tyre tracks,' I whisper to the toad. My knees are starting to hurt from the squatting. Still no movement from the toad. One of the other toads tries to catch a lift on his back, trying to hang on with its front legs under its armpits, but it keeps sliding off. They're probably scared of water like me. I stand up again, pick up my lantern and quickly shove the two toads into my coat pocket when no one's looking, then I search the group for the two people wearing fluorescent vests.

Mum had insisted we put them on. 'Otherwise you'll be as flat as the run-over toads yourselves. Nobody wants that. These will turn you into lanterns.'

Obbe had smelled the fabric. 'No way I'm going to put that on. We'll look like total idiots in these dirty, stinking sweat-bags. No one else will be wearing safety vests.'

Mum sighed. 'I always get it wrong, don't I?' And she turned the corners of her mouth downwards. They'd been

constantly turned downwards recently, as though there were fruit-shaped weights hanging on them, like on the tablecloth that goes with the garden set.

'You're doing fine, Mum. Of course we'll wear them,' I said, gesturing to Obbe. The vests are only used when the kids in the last year of primary take their cycling proficiency test, which Mum oversees. She sits on a fishing chair at the only crossroads in the village, and puts on her concerned face, lips pursed – a poppy that just won't open. It's her job to check that everyone sticks out their arm to indicate and gets through the traffic safely. The first time I felt ashamed of my mum was on that crossroads.

A fluorescent vest comes towards me. Hanna is carrying a black bucket of toads in her right hand, and her vest is half open, its panels flapping in the wind. The sight of it makes me feel anxious. 'You have to close your vest.' Hanna raises her eyebrows, staples in the canvas of her face. She manages to keep looking at me like this – with slight irritation – for a long time. Now the sun is becoming hotter during the day, she's getting more freckles around her nose. An image flashes into my mind: a flattened Hanna with the freckles splattered around her over the tarmac, the way some run-over toads end up in pieces. And then we'd have to scrape her off the road with a spade.

'But I'm so hot,' Hanna says.

At that moment, Obbe joins us. His blond hair is long and hangs in greasy strings in front of his face. He repeatedly smooths it behind his ear before it slowly tumbles back again.

'Look. This one looks like Reverend Renkema. See that fat head and those bulging eyes? And Renkema doesn't have a neck either.' A brown toad is sitting on the palm of his hand. We laugh but not too loudly: you mustn't mock the pastor, just like you mustn't mock God; they're best friends and you have to watch out with best friends. I don't have a best friend yet but there are lots of girls at the new school who might become one. Obbe started secondary ages ago, and Hanna is two years below me at primary school. She's got as many friends as God had disciples.

Suddenly Obbe holds his lantern above the toad's head. I see its skin glow pale yellow. It squeezes its eyes shut. Obbe begins to grin.

'They like heat,' he says, 'that's why they bury their ugly heads in the mud in the winter.' He moves the lantern closer and closer. When you fry capers they go black and crispy. I want to knock Obbe's hand away, but then the lady with the squash and the Milky Ways comes over to us. He quickly puts the toad in his bucket. The squash lady is wearing a T-shirt that says LOOK OUT! TOADS CROSSING. She must have seen Hanna's shocked expression because she asks us if everything's all right, if all the crushed bodies aren't upsetting us. I lovingly wrap my arm around my little sister who has put on a sulky pout. I'm aware there's a risk she could suddenly burst into tears, like this morning when Obbe flattened a grasshopper against the stable wall with his clog. I think it was mainly the sound that scared her, but she stuck to her guns: to her it was that little life, the wings folded in front of the

grasshopper's head like mini fly-screens. She saw life; Obbe and I saw death.

The squash lady smiles crookedly, and fetches a Milky Way for each of us from her coat pocket. I accept it out of politeness and, when she's not looking, take it out of its wrapper and drop it into the bucket of toads: toads never get tummy ache or stomach cramps.

'The three kings are OK,' I say.

Since the day Matthies didn't come home, I've been calling us the three kings because one day we'll find our brother, even though we'll have to travel a long way and go bearing gifts.

I wave my lantern at a bird to drive it away. The candle wobbles dangerously, and a drop of candle-grease falls on my welly. The startled bird flies up into a tree.

Wherever you cycle through the village or the fields, you see the dried-up reptilian bodies like little tablecloths. With all of the children and volunteers who have come to help, we carry our full buckets and lanterns to the other side of the verge which runs down to the lake. The water looks so stupidly innocent today and in the distance I can see the outlines of the factories, the tall buildings with dozens of lights and the bridge between the village and the city, like Moses' path when he stretched out his hand over the sea like the Bible says: 'Then the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.'

Hanna stands next to me and peers across to the other side.

'Just look at all those lights,' she says. 'Maybe they have a lantern parade every single night.'

'No, it's because they're afraid of the dark,' I say.

'*You're* afraid of the dark.'

I shake my head but Hanna is busying emptying her bucket. Dozens of frogs and toads spread across the surface of the water. The gentle splashing sounds make me feel dizzy. I suddenly notice that the fabric of my coat is sticking to my armpits. To waft away the heat I flap my arms like a bird that wants to take off.

'Do you ever want to go to the other side?' Hanna asks.

'There's nothing to see there; they don't even have any cows.' I block her view by standing in front of her, and drawing the left side of her safety vest to the side with the Velcro and pressing it hard so that it sticks.

My sister steps to one side. She's put her hair in a ponytail that gives her an encouraging pat on the back with every movement. I really want to pull the elastic out. I don't want her to think that anything's possible, that she can put on her ice skates one day and disappear.

'Don't you want to know what it's like there?'

'Of course not, you blockhead. You know that . . .' I don't finish my sentence, but chuck the empty bucket into the grass next to me.

I walk away from her and count my footsteps. By the time I reach four, Hanna is walking next to me again. Four's my favourite number. A cow has four stomachs, there are four

seasons, a chair has four legs. The heavy feeling I just had in my chest pops, like the air bubbles in the lake that float to the surface and go their separate ways.

'It must be boring there without any cows,' she says quickly.

In the candlelight you can't see that her nose is crooked on her face. She has a cast in her right eye; it's as though she's continually adjusting her gaze to focus on you, like a camera's shutter speed. I wish I could put in a new roll of film to be sure she'll see well enough to stay safe. I hold out my hand to Hanna and she takes it. Her fingers feel sticky.

'Obbe's talking to a girl,' she says.

I look back. His lanky body suddenly seems to know how to move better; he makes a few exaggerated gestures with his hands and laughs with sound again, the first time in ages. Then he squats down at the lakeside. Now he's probably telling a nice story about toads, about our good intentions, but not about the water, barely warmed by the sun, where the toads are now swimming and at the bottom of which our brother lay a year and a half ago. He walks back along the dike with the girl. After a few yards we can no longer see them; they've dissolved into the darkness. All we find is his half-burned lantern on the tarmac. The little green candle lies next to it, stamped flat like a goose dropping. I scrape it up with my spade. We can't just leave it here alone like that after a whole evening's faithful service. When we get back to the farm, I hang it on a branch of the knotted willow tree. The trees stand in a row with their heads bent towards my bedroom, like a group of church elders listening in on us. I suddenly feel the toads moving in my coat

pocket. I lay my hand over them protectively. I turn ninety degrees and say to Hanna, 'Don't say anything to Mum and Dad about the other side, they'll get even more upset.'

'I won't say anything. It was a stupid idea.'

'Very stupid.'

We can see Mum and Dad through the window, sitting on the sofa. From behind, they look just like the candle stubs in our lanterns. We use some spit to put them out.

2

Mum is getting the amount of food on her plate wrong more and more often. As soon as she's sat down after dishing it up, she says, 'It really did look like more than that from above.' Sometimes I'm worried it's our fault, that we're nibbling away at her from the inside, like what happens to a black lace-weaver spider. The teacher told us about them during a biology lesson – once she's given birth, the mother gives herself to her young. The tiny hungry spiders devour the mother: every last bit of her, until not even a leg is left. They don't mourn her for a second. Mum always leaves a bit of her chicken cordon bleu on the edge of her plate, 'leaving the best till last', saving herself until the end of the meal just in case we, her young, have not yet filled our bellies.

I gradually start looking down at our family from above, too, so it's less noticeable how little we amount to without Matthies. The empty place at the table now only has a seat and a chair-back that my brother can no longer casually set his weight against, causing my dad to roar, 'Four legs!' No one's allowed to sit on that chair either. I guess that's in case he comes back one day. 'If Jesus returns, it will be a day just like any other. Life will go on as usual. Just like when Noah built his ark, people will be busy working and eating, drinking and

getting married. Matthies will be as entirely expected as He is, when he returns,' Dad had said at the funeral. When he comes back, I'll push his chair in so much it touches the edge of the table, so that he won't spill his food or slip away without a sound. Since his death, we've been eating in fifteen minutes. When the big hand and the small hand are standing upright, Dad gets up. He puts on his black beret and goes to do the cows, even if they've just been done.

'What are we eating?' Hanna asks.

'New potatoes and beans,' I say after I've lifted one of the pan lids. I see my pale face reflected in the saucepan. I cautiously smile at myself, just briefly, otherwise Mum glares at you until the corners of your mouth go down again. There's nothing here to smile about. The only place we sometimes forget about that is behind the covering shed, out of the sight of our parents.

'No meat?'

'Burnt,' I whisper.

'Again.'

Mum slaps my hand, I drop the lid and it falls, leaving a damp circle behind on the tablecloth.

'Don't be so greedy,' Mum says, closing her eyes. Everyone copies immediately, even though Obbe, just like me, keeps one open to keep an eye on things. There's never any warning that we're about to pray or that Dad's going to say grace, so you just have to sense it.

'But may our souls not cleave to this transient life but do everything that God bids us and end up finally by Him.

Amen,' my father says in a solemn voice before opening his eyes. Mum fills the plates one by one. She has forgotten to turn on the extractor fan – the whole house stinks of charred fillet steak and the windows have steamed up. Now no one can look in from the street and see that she's still in her pink dressing gown. In the village people stare in through each other's windows a lot, to check what kind of hours they work and how the family keep each other warm. Dad is sitting at the table with his head in his hands. He's held it high all day long but at the table it falls down; it has become too heavy. From time to time he lifts it again to put his fork in his mouth before letting it droop again. The little stabs inside my belly get worse, as though holes are being pricked in the lining. No one says anything, just knives and forks scraping on plates. I pull the cords of my coat even tighter. I wish I could squat on my chair. My stomach, which is swelling, would hurt less then and I'd have a better view. Dad finds that position irreverent and taps his fork on my knee until I'm sitting on my bottom again. Sometimes there are red stripes on my knees, like a tally of the days without Matthies.

Suddenly Obbe leans towards me and says, 'Do you know what an accident in an underpass looks like?' I've just pricked four holes in a string bean with my fork – the juice is seeping out and now it's a recorder. Before I can reply, Obbe has opened his mouth. I see watery mashed potato dotted with bits of beans and some apple puree. It looks like vomit. Obbe laughs and swallows the casualties. There's a pale blue line on his forehead. He butts his head against the edge of the bed

in his sleep. He's still too young to worry about it. Dad says children can't have worries because they only come when you have to plough and grub your own fields, even though I keep discovering more and more worries of my own and they keep me awake at night. They seem to be growing.

Now that Mum has got thinner and her dresses baggier, I'm afraid she'll die soon and that Dad will go with her. I follow them about all day so that they can't suddenly die and disappear. I always keep them in the corner of my eye, like the tears for Matthies. And I never switch off the light globe on my bedside table until I've heard Dad's snores, and the bedsprings creaking twice. Mum always rolls from right to left to right before she finds the right fit. Then I lie in the light of the North Sea, waiting for it to go quiet. But when they go to visit friends in the village in the evenings and Mum shrugs when I ask what time they'll be back, I lie for hours staring at the ceiling. Then I imagine how I'll cope as an orphan and what I'll tell the teacher about the cause of their deaths. There is a list of the top ten causes of death. I once Googled them at break time. Lung cancer was number one. I've secretly put together my own list: drowning, traffic accidents and slipping in the cowshed are at the top.

After I've figured out what I'm going to tell the teacher and stop wallowing in self-pity, I press my head into my pillow. I'm too old to believe in the tooth fairy but too young not to still long for her. Obbe sometimes jokingly calls her 'the tooth bitch' because she just stopped paying him one day and his back teeth, roots and all, were under his pillow. They left

a bloody mark behind because he never rinsed them. If she comes to visit me one day, I'll flatten her. Then she'll have to stay and I'll wish for new parents. I've still got my wisdom teeth to use as bait. Very occasionally I go downstairs when they're not back yet. I sit in the dark in my pyjamas on the sofa, my knees together, hands folded, and I promise to God that I'll take another bout of diarrhoea if He brings them home safely. I expect the phone to ring at any moment and to hear they lost control of the wheel, or the handlebars of a bike. But the phone never rings, and usually I get cold after a while and go back upstairs where I continue my wait under the covers. They're not brought back to life until I hear the bedroom door and the shuffle of Mum's slippers. And then I can fall asleep with peace of mind.

Before we have to go to bed, Hanna and I play a bit. Hanna sits on the carpet behind the sofa. I look at my socks pulled up high, the tops folded twice. I rub them flat. My sister is sitting next to the Thunderbirds island. It used to belong to Matthies, and we often played with it together. We'd fire rockets into the sky and fight with the enemy – we could choose who that was ourselves back then. Obbe is lying on his chest across the sofa, headphones over his ears. He looks down on us. There's a mayonnaise stain in the shape of France on his grey T-shirt.

'I'll let anyone who breaks the trees on the drive listen to the new *Hitzone* for ten minutes on my Discman.'

Obbe lets his headphones sink from his ears until they're around his neck. Almost everyone in my class has got a

Discman, except for the squares. I don't want to be a square and that's why I'm saving up for a Discman: a Philips one with an anti-shock system so that it doesn't keep cutting out on my way to school over the bumps in the fields. And a protective jacket the same colour as my coat. I don't have to save up much more. Dad gives us two euros every Saturday for helping on the farm. He hands it over solemnly: 'Put this in your bottom drawer for later.' The thought of the Discman allows me to forget everything around me, even the fact that Dad is hoping we'll move out.

The island's trees were once olive green, but they've faded over the years and the paint has chipped off. As though someone's urging me on, I've broken off a whole row of plastic trees before I know it. I hear them snap between my fingers. Anything you can break with just one hand isn't worth breaking. Hanna starts to yell at once.

'It was just a joke, you idiot,' Obbe says quickly.

He turns around as Mum comes out of the kitchen and puts his headphones back over his ears. Mum has tied the belt of her dressing gown tight. Her eyes dart from Hanna to me to Obbe. Then she sees the snapped-off trees in my hand. Without a word she pulls me up by my arm, digging her nails into my coat – which I don't even want to take off indoors any more – which press through the fabric. I try not to react and most of all not to look at Mum so that she doesn't get it into her head to take my coat off me, without mercy, the way she peels potatoes. She lets go of me at the bottom of the stairs.

'Go and fetch your piggy bank,' she says as she blows a lock

of blonde hair away from her face. My heartbeat quickens with every step. For a moment I think of the proverb from the Book of Jeremiah that Granny sometimes quotes when she's reading the paper, licking her thumb and first finger so that the world's problems don't stick together: 'The heart is deceitful above all things, yes, and desperately wicked: who can know it?'

Nobody knows my heart. It's hidden deep beneath my coat, my skin, my ribs. My heart was important for nine months inside my mother's belly, but once I left the belly, everyone stopped caring whether it beat enough times per hour. No one worries when it stops or begins to beat fast, telling me there must be something wrong.

Downstairs I have to put my piggy bank on the kitchen table. It's a china cow with a slot in its back. There's a plastic stopper in its bum hole so you can take money out. There's duct tape over it so that I have to get through two barriers before I spend my money on rubbish.

'Because of your sins He keeps Himself hidden and He no longer wants to hear you,' Mum says. She is holdig a claw hammer – she must have been waiting for me with it. I try not to think about the Discman I want so much. My parents' loss is much worse – you can't save up for a new son.

'But there's a hole . . .' I try.

Mum presses the side of the hammer you use to get nails out of wood – they look like two metal rabbit's ears, reminding me briefly of what I sacrificed to keep Dieuwertje alive – gently against my swollen belly. I quickly take the hammer. Its handle

feels warm. I lift it up and let it fall onto the piggy bank with a big smack. It breaks into three pieces. My mum carefully fishes out the red and blue notes and a couple of coins. She gets the dustpan and brush and sweeps up the pieces of the cow. I grip the handle's hammer so tightly my knuckles turn white.

3

My head full of black-and-white images, I lie on top of my dinosaur duvet cover. I keep my arms stiff alongside my body, my feet slightly parted, like a soldier at ease, my coat as armour. At school today we did the Second World War and we watched a film about it on School TV. I get a lump in my throat again instantly. I see the images of Jews, lying on top of each other like braising steaks, the bald-headed Germans in old cars. They looked like the plucked bums of our laying hens, pinkish with black stubble, and once you get an outbreak of feather pecking amongst them, they won't let anyone escape.

I raise myself half up on my mattress and scratch a fluorescent star from the sloping roof. Dad has already taken away a few, which he does whenever I come home with a bad grade and it's his turn to tuck me up at night. Dad always used to make up a story about little Johnny who was up to no good. He was always doing something that wasn't allowed. Now Johnny's a good boy so he doesn't get punished – either that or Dad keeps forgetting to tell me about him.

'Where's Johnny?' I asked.

'He's tired and crushed.'

Then I knew right away that Dad's head is tired and crushed inside because that's where Johnny lives.

'Is he ever coming back?'

'Don't count on it,' Dad replied in a dejected voice.

When he takes off a star he leaves behind the white Blu-Tack: each bit stands for a question I got wrong. I stick the pulled-off star on my coat at heart height. When the teacher was telling us about it, I wondered what it would be like to kiss a tash-face like Hitler. Dad only has a moustache when he drinks beer. He gets a line of foam along his top lip. Hitler's was at least two fingers thick.

Under the desk, I'd put my hand on my belly to calm down the tickling insects. I got them more and more often in my belly and crotch. I could also make them start by thinking that I was lying on top of Johnny. Sometimes I thought that was why he was crushed, but as long as Dad's head was still round and on top of his body, I didn't take that seriously. I rarely asked questions – they just didn't occur to me. But this time I'd raised my hand.

'Do you think that Hitler sometimes cried when he was alone?'

The teacher, who is also my form tutor, looked at me for a long time before answering. She had eyes that always shone, as though there were battery-run tea lights behind them that lasted a long time. Maybe she was waiting for me to cry so that she could see whether I was a good or a bad person. After all, I still hadn't cried about my brother, not even soundlessly, as my tears got stuck in the corner of my eye. I guessed it was because of my coat. It was warm in the classroom, which meant my tears would surely evaporate before they reached my cheeks.

'Villains don't cry,' the teacher said then. 'Only heroes cry.'

I'd looked down. Were Obbe and I villains? Mum only cried with her back to us, and so quietly you couldn't hear it. Everything her body did was silent, even her farts.

The teacher told us that Hitler's favourite pastime was daydreaming and that he was afraid of illness. He suffered from stomach cramps, eczema and wind, although that last one was because he ate a lot of bean soup. Hitler had lost three brothers and a sister, none of whom made it to the age of six. I'm like him, I thought, and nobody must know it. We even share the same birthday – 20 April. On good days, Dad tells us from his smoking chair that it was the coldest April day in years and that I came into the world light blue that Saturday, and they almost had to chisel me out of the womb like a statue out of ice. In my baby album, there's a coil stuck next to my first scan: a copper tube with a bow on it and little white hooks like tiny shark's teeth that could bite every sperm dead, and a thread at the bottom that looks like a mucus trail. I'd managed to avoid the coil and had swum through it. When I asked why Mum had shark's teeth in her, Dad had said, 'Be ye fruitful and multiply, bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply, but make sure you've got enough bedrooms first. This was a stop-gap solution, God knew that, only you were already as stubborn as a mule.' After I was born, my mum didn't get another coil. 'Children are the Lord's legacy.' You can't say no to legacies.

I secretly Googled my birthday later. We can only get on the internet when the phone cable is out and the internet cable is plugged in, so it crackles and beeps as it connects – and we're

made me feel calm: a mass grave of milk biscuits. My stomach rumbled. Some of the biscuits had already gone soft, as though someone had put them in their mouth and then spat them back out into the silver foil. After it had been through your intestines, food turned into poo. All of the toilets here had a ledge inside – my turd would be served up to me on a white plate, and I didn't want that. I had to keep it inside me.

'They say you can't grow tits and that's why you always wear your coat. And that you never wash it. We can smell cow.'

Belle used her fountain pen to make a full stop after the title on her page. I wanted to be that blue dot for a moment. And then for there to be nothing else after me. No lists, thoughts or longings. Just nothing at all.

Belle looked at me expectantly. 'You're just like Anne Frank. You're in hiding.' I pushed my pencil into the grinder of my pencil sharpener that I'd got out of my bag, and turned it until there was a very sharp point. I let it break twice.

I roll over on the mattress that used to belong to Matthies so that I'm lying on my belly. For the last couple of weeks I've been sleeping in his bedroom in the attic. Hanna's got my old room now. Sometimes I think that Johnny has stayed in my old room, that he finds it too scary in the attic because since then, Dad hasn't told me anything about him, and only his absence has made an impression. In the middle of the mattress there's the hollow of my brother's body. It's the shape left by death and whichever way I turn it or flip it over, the hollow stays a hollow that I try not to end up in.

I look for my teddy bear but can't see it anywhere. Not at the foot of the bed, not under the duvet, not under the bed. Immediately I hear my mum's voice inside my head: 'Disgusting.' That's what she'd said and it was in the look on her face when she suddenly came into my room, the stress on 'gust'. It was an ugly word and if you said it, it was a bit like needing to vomit. She'd first said the word and then spelled it out: d-i-s-g-u-s-t-i-n-g, her nose stuck up in the air. I suddenly realize where my bear must be. I slip through the opening in the covers and look out of my bedroom window into the garden where I see my bear hanging on the washing line. There are two red wooden pegs in each ear. He is being rocked roughly back and forth by the wind, making exactly the same movement I made when I was lying on top of him, causing Mum to clap her hands three times like she was chasing a crow from the cherry tree. She'd seen the way I was pushing my crotch into its fluffy bottom. Since I've been sleeping here in the attic I've been doing that. I close my eyes and first run through the day as I move, repeating everything everyone said to me and the way they said it, and only then do I think about the Philips Discman I really wanted, about two snails having sex on top of each other, the way Obbe separated them that time with a screwdriver, about Dieuwertje Blok from the TV, about Matthies on the ice, about a life without my coat but with myself. Just until I need to pee.

'An idol is what you flee to before you go to God,' she said to me a bit later, when I came down for a beaker of warm milk with aniseed. As a punishment she's put my bear in the

wash and hung him on the line. I creep down the stairs in my socks, slip through the hall to the back garden, and step into the tepid evening air. Behind me in the farmyard, the construction light is still on. My parents are giving the calves their milk before they go to bed, a sum I'm not allowed to forget: one scoop of protein powder to two litres of water. That's how the calves get extra protein; after drinking it, their noses smell of vanilla. I can hear the milk tank buzzing, the clatter of the drinking troughs. I quickly pull on my mum's clogs which are next to the door, sprint across the grass to the washing line, take the pegs from my bear's ears and clutch him tight to my chest, rocking him gently back and forth a few times as though he's Matthies, as though I've fished him out of the dark lake in the dead of the night. He feels heavy and wet. It will be at least a night before he's dry, a week before the smell of washing powder has worn off. His right eye is watering. When I walk back across the lawn, Mum and Dad's voices become louder. By the sound of it they are arguing. I can't handle arguments, just like Obbe can't handle anyone talking back to him, and presses his hands to his ears and begins to hum. Since I don't want to stand out in the darkness, I lay one hand over the fluorescent star on my coat, hold my bear in the other, and hide behind the rabbit hutches. The warm ammonia smell of the rabbits seeps through the splits in the wood. Obbe had got a couple of fat maggots from the muck-heap to use for fishing. When he went to thread the hook through those little bodies, I quickly looked the other way. From here I can hear what the row's about, and I see

Mum standing next to the manure pit with a pitchfork.

'If you hadn't have wanted to get rid of the child . . .'

'Oh, so now it's my fault?' Dad says.

'That's why God took away our oldest son.'

'We weren't married yet . . .'

'It's the tenth plague, I'm sure of it.'

I hold my breath. My coat feels damp from the wet bear against my chest, and its head droops forwards. I wonder for a moment whether Hitler would have told his mum what he was planning and that he was going to make a mess of it. I haven't told anyone that I prayed for Dieuwertje to survive. Could the tenth plague be my fault?

'We have to get along with what we've got,' Dad says.

I see his outline in the light of the construction lamp. His shoulders are higher than normal. Just like the coat rack he's hung higher now that we're taller, his shoulders are raised a couple of centimetres. Mum laughs. It's not her normal laugh: it's the laugh she does when she actually *doesn't* find something funny. It's confusing, but grown-ups are often confusing because their heads work like a Tetris game and they have to arrange all their worries in the right place. When there are too many of them, they pile up and everything gets stuck. Game over.

'I'd rather jump off the silo tank.'

The stabs in my belly get worse. It's as though my stomach is Granny's pincushion, which she pricks her pins in so as not to lose them.

'You haven't told anyone about the baby. Who knows

what the family thinks. Only God knows and he'll forgive a thousand times over,' Dad says.

'As long as you're keeping count,' Mum says, turning her back. She is almost as thin as the manure fork leaning against the wall of the barn. Now it dawns on me why she's stopped eating. During the toad migration, Obbe told me that after they've hibernated, toads don't eat again until they've mated, no sooner. My parents no longer touch each other, not even briefly. This must mean they don't mate either.

Back in my bedroom I look at the toads in the bucket under my desk. They're not on top of each other yet and the lettuce leaves are untouched at the bottom of the bucket.

'Tomorrow you're going to mate,' I say. Sometimes you have to be clear about things, set down rules, otherwise everyone will walk all over you.

Then I stand in front of the mirror next to my wardrobe and brush my hair sideways across my head. Hitler combed his hair like this to hide the scar of a bullet that had grazed his face. Once my hair is combed, I go and lie on my bed. In the light of my globe, I can see the rope hanging above my head from a beam. There still isn't a swing on it, or a rabbit. I see a loop at the end. Just big enough for a hare's neck. I try to reassure myself by thinking that my mum's neck is at least three times thicker and she's scared of heights.

4

'Are you angry?'

'No,' Mum says.

'Sad?'

'No.'

'Happy?'

'Just normal,' Mum says, 'I'm just normal.'

No, I think to myself, my mum's anything but normal. Even the omelette she's making right now is anything but normal. There are bits of eggshell in it and it's stuck to the bottom of the frying pan, and both the white and the yolk have dried out. She's stopped using butter and she's forgotten the salt and pepper again. Her eyes have been deeper in their sockets lately too, like my old flat football is sinking further and further into the manure pit next to the cowshed. I throw the eggshells on the counter into the bin and see the shards of my smashed cow amongst the rubbish. I fish out its head, which, apart from the horns, is still intact, and quickly put it in my coat pocket. Then I get the yellow dish-cloth from the sink to wipe up the slimy trails left by the broken eggs. A shiver runs through me: I don't like dried-up dish-cloths; they feel less dirty when they're wet than when they're dry and are still full of bacteria. I rinse it under the tap and stand next to my mother again, ever closer

in the hope that she'll accidentally touch me when she moves the frying pan to the plates set out ready on the counter. Just for a moment. Skin against skin, hunger against hunger. Dad had made her stand on the scales before breakfast, otherwise he'd refuse to accompany her to church. It was an empty threat. I could hardly imagine a service without my dad being there, the way I sometimes ask myself what would become of God without my father. To underline his words, he'd put on his Sunday shoes immediately after breakfast rather than putting them in a row to be polished: we were only to appear before the Lord with polished toecaps, Mum sometimes said. Especially today, because it's the day of prayer for the crops, an important day for all the farmers in the village. Twice a year, before and after the harvest, the members of the Reformed community come together to pray and give thanks for the fields and the crops, that everything might blossom and grow – even while Mum is just getting thinner and thinner.

'Less than one and a half calves,' Dad said when Mum finally got on the scales. He bent over the numbers on the scales. Obbe and I stood in the door opening and glanced at each other. We all knew what happened to calves that were born too light, which were too skinny to go to the slaughter-house and too expensive to feed up. That's why most of them were given an injection. The longer Dad left her standing there, the more the numbers tried to crawl back, like snails, Mum getting quieter and seeming to shrink, as though the entire year's harvest was going to seed before our very eyes and there was nothing we could do about it. I wished I could have put on a packet of

pancake flour and castor-sugar so that Dad would stop this. He'd once told us that a single calf could feed fifteen hundred people, so it would be a long time before we'd nibbled away at all of Mum, until there were only bones left. All of us staring at her all the time was causing her not to eat: my rabbit Dieuwertje didn't start gnawing at the carrots poking through his manger until he got the idea I was no longer around. When Dad put the scales back under the sink later, I quickly took out the batteries.

Mum doesn't touch me once while portioning out the omelette, not even by accident. I take a step back and then another. Sadness ends up in your spine. Mum's back is getting more and more bent. This time there are two plates missing, one for Mum and one for Matthies. She has stopped eating with us, even though she keeps up appearances by making herself a sandwich, and she still sits at the head of the table opposite Dad, watching us with the eyes of Argus, bringing our forks to our mouths. For a moment I picture a dead baby and the Big Bad Wolf Granny used to tell us about when we stayed at her house and she tucked us in beneath an itchy horse blanket. One day they cut open the Big Bad Wolf's belly to rescue the seven goats and put stones in instead and sewed his belly up again. They must have put a stone back in my Mum's belly, I realize, which is why she's so hard and cold sometimes.

I take a bite of my bread. During dinner, Dad tells us about the cows that won't lie in the free stalls but sleep on the slats, which isn't good for their udders. He holds up a piece of omelette.

'No salt on this,' he says, pulling a face and taking a sip of his coffee at the same time. No salt on the egg but still a sip of coffee with it.

'And the bottom's burnt,' Obbe says.

'There are bits in it,' Hanna says.

All three look at Mum, who gets up from the table abruptly and dumps her cumin cheese sandwich in the bin and puts her plate in the sink. She wants us to think she wasn't planning on eating the sandwich, that we're the reason she's got so thin. She doesn't look at anyone, as though we're the crusts she always carefully cuts off and lays next to her plate, like points to deduct from our scores later. Her back to us, she says, 'See, you always take his side.'

'It's just a poor egg,' Dad says. His voice is lower, the sign he's waiting for a disagreement; sometimes even when there isn't one, he changes the other person's mind. He sniffs as he continues to inspect the piece of omelette. The tension makes me poke my little finger up my nose and hook a piece of snot. I glance at the yellowish ball and then put it in my mouth. The salty taste of snot makes me feel calm. When I move my hand back up to my nose, my father gives my wrist a tug. 'Just because it's the day of prayer it doesn't mean you should start the harvest.' I quickly move my arm back down, push my tongue back into my throat as far as it can go and snort. It works. Snot fills my mouth so that I can swallow again. Mum turns around. She looks tired.

'I'm a bad mother,' she says.

She fixes her gaze on the light bulb above the kitchen

table. It's time for it to be covered by a lampshade. With or without floral motif. Whenever we mention it, she says it's no longer worth the bother, that she's old and it's only more work for us when we have to divide up the lampshade and all the furniture after their death, just like all the other things she no longer wants to spend money on with an eye on the Day of Judgement. I quickly stand next to her with my plate in my hand. When we play football at school it's about getting the positions right. Someone has to be captain, be an attacker or defender. I put too big a piece of egg in my mouth.

'It's a perfect egg,' I say, 'not too salty, not too watery.'

'Yes,' Hanna says, 'and there's calcium in the shell.'

'Listen to that, Mother,' Dad says, 'you're not that bad.'

He smiles for a moment and lets his knife glide across his tongue, which is dark red with a blue stripe on the underside – a moor frog at breeding time. He gets a muesli roll from the bread-basket and studies it from every side. Every Wednesday we fetch bread from the baker's in the village before school. All the bread is past its sell-by date and actually supposed to go to the chickens, but we mainly eat it ourselves. Dad says, 'If the chickens don't get ill from it, neither will you.' I still get worried sometimes that mould will grow inside me, that one day my skin will turn blue and white, like the spiced buns Dad slices the mould off with a big knife before serving to us, and that in due course, I'll only be good as chicken feed.

The bread usually tastes nice though, and the trip to the baker's is the best one of the week. Dad proudly shows off his haul: glazed currant buns, egg cakes, sourdough bread, spiced

biscuits, doughnuts. Mum always takes out the croissants, even though she finds them too greasy. She looks for the best ones, and it gives her peace of mind if we want to eat them. The rest go to the chickens. I think we feel happy for a brief moment then, even if Dad says that's not for us, that we weren't made to be happy, just like our pale skins can't be in the sun for more than ten minutes so we always long for the shade, for darkness. This time we had a feed-bag of extra bread. Must be for the Jews in the basement. Maybe Mum makes good omelettes for them and cuddles them, making her forget to hold us, really tightly the way I sometimes hold Lien next door's cat – I feel the ribs through its fur against my belly, its little heart beating against mine.

We always sit in the front pew of the Reformed church on the dike – in the morning, evening and sometimes in the afternoon too for the children's service – so that everyone can see us coming in and know that despite our loss we still visit the House of the Lord, that despite everything we still believe in Him – even though I'm beginning to have more and more doubts about whether I find God nice enough to want to go and talk to Him. I've discovered that there are two ways of losing your belief: some people lose God when they find themselves; some people lose God when they lose themselves. I think I'll belong to that second group. My Sunday clothes are tight around my limbs, as though they were measured for the old version of myself. Granny compares going to church three times with tying your shoelaces: first you make a flat

knot, then a noose and tie them, and last a double knot to be sure they're securely tied, and in the same way we won't remember the message properly until after the third time. And on Tuesday evenings, Obbe, a few old classmates from primary school and I have to go to catechism at Reverend Renkema's house in preparation for confirmation. His wife gives us orange squash and a slice of Frisian gingerbread. I like to go, but more for the gingerbread than for God's word.

During the service I secretly hope that one of the oldies in the last pew – who sit there so they'll get home first – will faint or feel unwell. This happens regularly, and you'll hear the loud bang of an oldie folding in on themself like a prayer book, and if someone has to be carried out of the church, a wave of distress rushes through the congregation, distress that unites us more than all the words in the Bible. The same wave that often rushes through me. But I'm not the only one. Our heads half turned, we watch the fallen until they've disappeared around the corner, before starting on the next psalm. Granny is old too but she's never been carried out of the church. During the sermon, I fantasize sometimes that she's collapsed and that I'm the one who will carry her outside like a hero, everyone turning their heads for me. But Granny is still as fit as a young heifer. She says that God is just like the sun: He always stays with you, however hard you cycle away from Him. He always travels with you. I know she's right. I've sometimes tried to lose the sun by being quicker, by playing hide and seek, but it stays visible behind my back or in the corner of my eye.

I look at Obbe who is sitting next to me on the bench. He's closed his hymn-book: its thin pages remind me too much of my mother's skin, as though with each psalm we turn her over and forget about her. He is picking at a blister on the palm of his hand. Now summer's coming, the stalls have to be mucked out so that they'll be spotless for the winter. We never really live in the seasons as we're always busy with the next one.

In time, the blister's soft membrane will become rock hard and you roll it off between your thumb and forefinger. We are constantly renewing ourselves – apart from Mum and Dad. Just like the Old Testament they keep repeating their words, behaviour, patterns and rituals, even if we, their followers, are moving further and further away from them. The pastor asks us to close our eyes and to pray for the fields and the crops. I pray for my parents: for Mum to get the silo out of her stubborn head and not to notice the rope hanging from the beam when she's dusting my bedroom. I think about her every time I make a loop in my exercise book or tie a knot in a bread-bag, because the clip never gets put on top of the bread-bin now. I suspect Dad's been putting them in the pocket of his overalls. And sometimes, when I'm lying on my belly on my mattress, moving on top of my bear, I fantasize that we have a little machine in the kitchen like the one they have on Stoepje's market stall that seals the bread-bag with a red plastic ribbon. Then it won't matter any more if we lose the clips and Mum will no longer be sad.

I peek through my eyelashes at my dad. His cheeks are wet. Maybe we're not praying for the crops but for the harvest of

all the children in the village, for them to grow big and strong. And Dad's realized that he hasn't paid attention to his own fields and he's even allowed them to become flooded. Apart from food and clothes we also need attention. They seem to keep forgetting that. I close my eyes again and pray for the toads underneath my desk, hoping for the mating season that might encourage Mum and Dad too, and for the Jews in the basement, even though I don't think it's fair they're allowed cornflakes and hot dogs. I don't open my eyes until I feel a roll of peppermints pressing into my side.

'Only people with a lot of sins pray for a long time,' Obbe whispers.

5

The side of Obbe's forehead is blue like bread mould. Every few minutes he feels for his crown and smooths the hair around it flat with three fingers. Mum says we all have difficult skulls. I think it's because we all miss the pressure on our foreheads since Dad stopped laying his hand on our heads and just keeps his hands stiffly in the pockets of his overalls. The crown is the starting point from which we have grown, where all the separate bits of skull have come together. Perhaps that's why Obbe keeps touching his, to make sure he exists.

Mum and Dad don't see our tics. They don't realize that the fewer rules there are, the more we start inventing for ourselves. Obbe thought we should get together and talk about it, so after the service we've all gathered in his room. I'm sitting on the bed with Hanna who is leaning on me listlessly. I tickle her neck gently. She smells of Dad's restlessness, the smell of his cigarette smoke in her cardigan. There are little cracks in the headboard of Obbe's bed where he bangs every night or thrashes from one side of his pillow to the other, making a monotonous sound. Sometimes I try to guess the tune through the wall. Sometimes it's singing but more often just humming. He doesn't do psalms, which I'm glad about because they make me miserable. When I hear him banging, I go to his

room and tell him to be quiet otherwise Mum will lie awake worrying how we're going to sleep in a tent in a campsite, if we ever get to go on holiday. It helps for a while but after a few minutes the banging starts up again. Sometimes I'm worried the wood won't split but his head, that we'll have to sand him and varnish him again. Hanna bangs too, which is why she's been sleeping in my bed more often, so I can hold her head until she falls asleep.

Downstairs we hear Mum vacuuming the front room. I hate that sound. Mum vacuums three times a day, even when there are no crumbs, even when we pick up all the crumbs from the carpet in our hands and carry them to the door and throw them into the gravel.

'Do you think they still kiss?' Hanna asks.

'Maybe they French kiss,' Obbe says.

Hanna and I giggle. Kissing with tongues always makes me think of those slimy, purplish-red cooking pears that Mum makes with cinnamon, blackcurrant juice, cloves and sugar, all tied up with each other.

'Or they lie on top of each other in the nuddy.'

Obbe gets his hamster out of the cage next to his bed. It's recently been renamed Tiesey. It's a little desert hamster. Its wheel is yellow from caked piss and there are sunflower seed cases everywhere. First you have to move your finger in the sawdust before you get him out of his nest, otherwise he'll be startled and bite. I want to be approached with the same caution, because every morning I'm dragged from Matthies's hollow by my dad who pulls the duvet off me and says, 'Cow

time. They're mooing with hunger.' It's easier to get into a hollow than to come out of one.

The hamster walks along my brother's arm. Its cheek pouches are round and full with food. It reminds me of Mum: but no, hers are the opposite – sunken. She can't be saving food in them to nibble away at later in the evening – although I did catch her licking out a yoghurt carton yesterday after dinner. She'd torn it open along the fold. She spread a bit of blackberry jam over the sides. I heard her finger keep disappearing into her mouth, the gentle plop, a string of saliva. Once a week the hamster gets a beetle or an earwig that we get from the cows' straw. But it's not enough to live off. Mum has to start eating again.

'Tiesey? That's short for Matthies,' I say.

Obbe gives me a big shove in my side; I fall off his bed and land on my funny bone. I try not to cry, even though it hurts and a light electric shock runs through my body. It wouldn't be fair not to cry about Matthies but then cry about myself. It still takes me some effort to hold back the tears. Maybe I'm becoming as fragile as Mum's dinner service and over time I'll have to be wrapped up in newspaper when I go to school. *Be brave*, I whisper to myself. *You have to be brave.*

All of a sudden Obbe acts kind, he makes his voice gentle. He touches his crown briefly. With fake cheeriness he says he didn't mean it like that – I don't know how he did mean it then, but it's not wise to go into it. Hanna looks nervously at the door. Dad sometimes gets so angry when he hears us arguing that he chases you around the farm, even though it

looks more like hopping because he can't run on his gammy leg. If he does get hold of you, he gives you a kick up the backside or a slap against the back of your head. The best thing to do is run to the kitchen table. After going round and round a few times, he gives up, getting more oxygen to his brain, absorbing it like the butterflies do through the holes in the cottage cheese box where Obbe keeps them captive in his desk drawer. When a silence falls you can hear their wings beating against the plastic lid. They're for an important school experiment about the lifespan of a certain type of butterfly, he told us. Dad keeps his leg hidden. He never wears shorts, not even when it's boiling hot – I sometimes imagine that his legs are just like a twin-stick ice lolly, and that one day they'll break loose from each other and we'll throw away the bad leg, or let it melt in the sun behind the covering shed.

'If you don't cry, I'll show you something amazing,' Obbe says.

I breathe in and out deeply and pull my coat sleeves right down to my knuckles. They are beginning to fray at the seam. I hope they don't slowly get shorter until I'm totally exposed. It's not good to pick open the cocoons in the back garden before the butterflies have hatched. Crippled butterflies might come out and I'm sure they wouldn't be allowed to take part in Obbe's experiment.

I nod as a sign that I'm not going to cry. Being brave starts with holding back the tears.

My brother lets Tiesey go inside the collar of his pyjamas, pulling up the waist of his boxer shorts when the hamster

reaches his belly. I can see his willy lying there with black curls around it like Dad's tobacco. Hanna begins to giggle again.

'Your willy's doing something strange, it's standing up.'

Obbe grins proudly. The hamster runs down along his willy. What if it bites or wants to burrow?

'If I pull at it, white stuff comes out.'

Now that sounds painful to me. I've already forgotten about my funny bone. I get a brief urge to touch his willy, to stroke it like Tiesey's fur. Just to see what it feels like, what material it's made of and whether you can move it, maybe to tug at it gently. If you do that to a cow's tail, they look back for a moment, except if you keep on doing it and then they kick back at you.

Obbe lets go of the waist of his blue and white striped boxers. We see the bulge moving around, like a wave in the ocean.

'Tiesey might suffocate,' Hanna says.

'My dick doesn't suffocate, does it?' Obbe says.

'That's true.'

'Isn't he going to stink of pee?'

My brother shakes his head. It's a shame I can no longer see his willy. I can feel the tickly insects tickling inside my belly, though that should be impossible because since the incident with the bear, Mum has been giving me a big spoonful of some syrupy stuff that tastes of liquorice every evening. It says on the label on the bottle: *To treat worms*. I hadn't told her I had been thinking about Johnny and Dieuwertje Blok, though mainly about Dieuwertje. Then she'd probably have a row

with Dad because Mum doesn't like made-up things, because stories in your imagination often leave out suffering and Mum thinks it should be part of things. She can never take a day off from thinking that because she'd feel guilty; she believes that everyone should bear their sins like lines for punishment in an exercise book.

Obbe wiggles his leg and Tiesey rolls out onto the duvet. His black eyes look like match ends, there's a black stripe along his back, and his right ear is folded double. It doesn't matter how often you stroke it flat, the ear just curls back. Hanna's just settling in against me when he picks up the glass of cloudy water from his bedside table. There's a pile of milk caps next to the glass. They're covered in sand. They used to call him the Flipper King at primary school. He beat everyone, even the cheats.

'I was about to show you something, right?'

'Wasn't that it already?' My mouth suddenly feels dry, and it's hard to swallow. I keep picturing the white stuff that Obbe was talking about. Is it like the filling in the piping bag we use to make stuffed eggs on birthdays? Mum keeps it in the basement otherwise the whole house stinks of it. It must be difficult for the Jews not to secretly eat it, not to flick out the yellowish goo with green bits of basil with their fingers like I've secretly done sometimes. I left the egg whites, as there was no point to them without the filling. When Matthies was still here, they said, 'It's that time of year again, the egg-eaters have been busy,' and I'd smile and get the second piping bag out of the fridge which they'd kept back just in case. Now they no

longer celebrate their birthdays and Mum has stopped making stuffed eggs.

'No,' he says, 'I'm only doing it now.'

He drops Tiesey into the glass of water, covers it with his hand and begins to move it slowly back and forth. I can't help laughing, it looks funny. Everything you can turn into a maths sum has a reassuring solution – I bet he'll need to breathe again after one minute. The hamster moves faster and faster from one side of the glass to the other, its eyes beginning to pop out, its legs kicking about wildly. It's only a few seconds before he starts to float like a grey air bubble in a spirit level. No one speaks. All we can hear are the butterflies flapping their wings. Then Hanna begins to cry with great sobs. There are footsteps on the stairs almost immediately. Startled, Obbe quickly puts the glass behind his Lego castle where the enemy is holding a ceasefire.

'What's going on?' Dad pushes open the door and looks around in irritation. My cheeks are red. Hanna is lying in a ball on the grey bedcovers.

'Jas pushed Hanna off the bed,' Obbe says. He looks me in the face. Nothing noticeable in his eyes. No air bubble being kept level. They're as dry as a bone. When Dad's looking the other way, Obbe briefly opens his mouth and pushes his finger in and out as though he needs to throw up. I quickly slide off the bed.

'Right,' Dad says, 'off to your bedroom, you, and pray.'

His shoe hits my bum; the poo stuck up it might have shot back up into my intestines now. When Mum learns the

truth about Tiesey she'll get depressed again and won't speak for days. I glance at Hanna and Obbe one last time, then the Lego castle. My brother is suddenly busy with his butterfly collection. He probably just beat them out of the air with his bare hands.

6

My sister is the only person who understands why I've stopped taking off my coat. And the only one who tries to think of a solution. Our evenings are filled with this. Sometimes I get afraid that one of her solutions is going to work, that I'll take away something from my sister, because as long as we still have desires we're safe from death, draped around the farm's shoulders like the suffocating smell after a day of muck-spreading. At the same time my red coat is fading, just like my image of Matthies. There isn't a photo of him anywhere in the house, just his milk teeth, some of which have dried-up blood on them, in a little wooden pot on the windowsill. I try to picture him every evening like an important history test, to learn his features off by heart – just like I learned the slogan 'liberté, égalité, fraternité' which I repeat constantly, especially at grown-up parties to show off what I've learned – afraid of the moment other boys might get into my head and let my brother slip out from between them. My coat pockets are heavy with all the things I'm collecting. Hanna bends over me and offers me a handful of salty popcorn: a sacrifice to make up for not having stuck up for me just now. If only I had pushed her from the bed Tiesey might still be alive. I don't feel like talking to her. The only person I'd like to see now is Mum

or Dad, and for them to say that I didn't do anything wrong. But Dad doesn't come. He never says sorry. He can't get the word across his chapped lips – only God's word rolls out smoothly. You don't know that things are good again until he asks you to pass the sandwich filling at the table. Then you can be happy you can pass him the apple syrup again, even though sometimes I'd like to take my knife and smear the syrup over his face so that our gazes stick to him, so that he sees the three kings can't find the Orient.

Suddenly I wonder whether Dad doesn't only scratch the sticky stars from my ceiling but also from the sky. That might be the reason everything looks blacker and Obbe meaner: we've lost our way and there's no one to ask for directions. Even the Big Bear from my favourite picture book, who takes down the moon every night for the Little Bear who is afraid of the dark, is hibernating. Only the night light in my socket offers some comfort. I'm actually too old for it, but in the night everyone is ageless. Fear has more disguises than my mother has floral dresses, and that's saying something as she's got a wardrobe full – though now she often wears the same one, the one with the cacti, as though it'll keep everyone away from her, even though she now wears her dressing gown over the top of it.

I lie with my face to the wall, which has a black-and-white poster of Boudewijn de Groot on it, the one with the lonely cyclist on a narrow mountain track with a child on the front of his bike. Sometimes, before I go to sleep I fantasize that I'm the child and Mum is riding the bike, even though Mum

doesn't like cycling, as she's much too afraid of getting her dress caught in the spokes, and we'll never get so lonely that we end up on the same path. When I turn over, Hanna lays the popcorn between us. It sticks to my bottom sheet right away. We take a piece in turn. A verse from Proverbs pops into my head: 'To do justice and judgement is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.' I can't resist this sacrifice as we rarely have popcorn, and I know that Hanna means well because she gets this guilty look on her face, her eyes raised, like the pastor when he's listing the sins of the community and looks up at the ceiling that's just been whitewashed.

From time to time, my hand arrives too late and I'll touch Hanna's fingers and feel her bitten-off nails. They're set deep in red-ringed flesh, chunks of white fat in a sausage. I only have a problem with black dirt stuck under mine. Hanna says my nails are going black because I think about death too much. I immediately picture Tiesey's bulging eyes, the emptiness that settled inside my head when he stopped treading water, and then the blow, the all-destructive silence of an ending, of an empty wheel.

As Hanna eats the last of the popcorn and talks about the new Barbie she wants, I realize that I've had my hands folded under my duvet for a while. Maybe God's been waiting for half an hour already for what I'm going to say. I unfold my hands: falling silent is also a way of saying something in the village. We don't have answering machines, but we do let long silences fall, silences in which sometimes you can hear the cows lowing in the background or the whistle of a kettle.

'Car accident or burning?' I ask.

Hanna's face relaxes now she knows I'm not angry with her and we're simply repeating our daily ritual. Her lips look red and fat from the salt. You get more from sacrifices than you give away. Is that why Obbe killed Tiesey? To get Matthies back? I don't want to think about my sacrifice that has four legs and more than a hundred million olfactory cells.

'How are they supposed to burn?'

'I don't know. Sometimes they forget to blow out the tea lights, the ones next to the window on the yard side,' I say.

Hanna nods slowly. She's wondering about the plausibility. I know I go too far, but the further I go in thinking up the different ways in which Mum and Dad might end their days, the less chance of surprises.

'Murdered or cancer?'

'Cancer,' I say.

'Jumped off the silo or drowned?'

'Why would you jump off the silo? That's just stupid,' Hanna asks.

'People do that when they feel very sad, they jump off things.'

'I think it's an idiotic idea.'

It hasn't occurred to me before that Mum and Dad couldn't only be overcome by death but they could beat death to it. That you could plan the Day of Judgement just like a birthday party. It must be because of what I heard my mother say the other day, and the rope on the beam. I think about the different coloured scarves she wraps around her before she

goes to church but worry they'll only make her crazier. She ties them so tightly that you can see the stripes on her skin after church. Maybe she wears them to reach the high notes of a psalm, as sometimes they're so high you have to clench your buttocks. But I say to my sister, 'It's a very stupid idea. I'll bet on a heart attack or a car accident, Mum drives so recklessly.'

I quickly put the last bit of popcorn in my mouth. It had rolled under my belly. I suck out the salt until it becomes tasteless and pappy on my tongue. It reminds me of the time that Obbe made me put a dead bumblebee in my mouth. It had been lying on the windowsill next to Mum's piece of chewing gum – before she goes to bed, she takes it out of her mouth, rolls it into a ball and leaves it to go hard overnight before chewing on it again the next day. I did it for a pile of milk caps; Obbe swore I wouldn't dare. I felt the bumblebee's little hairs against the roof of my mouth, its wings like sliced almonds on my tongue. Obbe counted to sixty. I pretended that it was a honey sweet, but a whole minute long I'd had death in my mouth.

'Has Dad got a heart, do you think?'

The image of the bumblebee makes way for Dad's chest. I saw it today. It was so hot he walked around the fields with the cows without his white vest on. He's got all of three hairs on his chest. Blond. I can't imagine a heart behind his ribs, more like a slurry pit.

'Most likely,' I say. 'He's always generous with the collection at church.'

Hanna nods and sucks in her cheeks. Her eyes are still

red from the crying. We don't talk about Tiesey. We don't talk about all the things we will never forget. The slurry pit only gets emptied once a year. This isn't the moment to pour out our hearts, even though I don't know when is. Granny sometimes says that praying makes your heart less heavy, but mine still only weighs three hundred grams. About the same as a packet of mincemeat.

'Do you know the story of Rapunzel?' Hanna asks.

'Of course I do.'

'She's our solution,' Hanna says. She turns onto her side so she can look me in the face. In the light of my globe, her nose looks like a capsized sailing boat. She has the kind of beauty you rarely see, like the drawings she does with crayons: they're lopsided and crooked and that's what gives them their beauty, their naturalness.

'One day she was rescued from her tower. We need a rescuer. Someone to take us away from this ridiculous village, from Dad and Mum, from Obbe, from ourselves.'

I nod, it's a good plan. Only my hair comes down to just under my ears and it will be years before it's long enough for someone to climb up with. Aside from that, the highest point here on the farm is the hayloft, and you can just get up there with a ladder.

'And to get you out of your coat,' Hanna continues. She runs her sticky fingers through my hair. I can smell the salty odour of popcorn. She moves them across my head, drumming, the way the tickling insects often push against my skin. I never touch Hanna, only when she asks me to. It doesn't occur to

me to. You've got two kinds of people, those who hold on and those who let go. I belong to the second category. I can only hold on to a person or a memory with the things I collect. I can safely stow them away in my coat pocket.

There's a popcorn husk caught on one of Hanna's incisors. I don't mention it.

'But can't we go together?' I ask.

'The other side is just like the off-licence in the village. You can't get in if you're under sixteen.'

Hanna gives me a determined look. There's no point arguing with her now.

'And it has to be a man. Rescuers are always men.'

'What about God, then? He's a rescuer, isn't he?'

'God only saves those who have sunk. You don't dare swim. Apart from that,' Hanna goes on, 'God's too friendly with Dad. He's sure to tell and then we'll never get away.'

Hanna is right. Even though I don't know whether I want a rescuer – first, you have to learn how to hold on yourself, but I don't want to disappoint my sister. I hear Dad screaming to us: 'He who leaves his brethren becomes a wanderer, adrift from his original existence.' Is this our original existence, or is there another life waiting for us somewhere on Earth that will fit around us like my coat?

'You've got twenty-four hours to make a choice,' Hanna says.

'Why twenty-four hours?'

'We don't have much time, our lives depend on it.' She says this in the same tone she uses when we're playing table tennis

in the barn, when the ball keeps ending up in the wrong place. Then she says, 'And now the real one.' As if we'd just been waving our bats around to chase away the dung flies.

'What then?' I ask.

'Then, then it will start,' Hanna whispers.

I hold my breath.

'Kissing. Rapunzel had her long hair, we've got our bodies. You always have to use your charms if you want to be rescued.' Hanna smiles. If I had a chisel I'd give her nose a tap to straighten it.

You should remove everything that attracts unwanted attention, my father once said when I hadn't been able to resist getting my Pokémon cards out of my bag. He threw them onto the fire, saying, 'No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other.'

He forgot that we already serve two – Dad and God. A third could make things complicated, but that's something to worry about later.

'Yuck.' I pull a disgusted face.

'Don't you want to be rescued and go to the other side of the bridge?'

'What shall we call our plan?' I say quickly.

Hanna ponders for a moment.

'Just The Plan?'

I pull the cords of my coat tighter and feel the collar close around my neck. Would the noose on the beam feel the same around your neck? I hear a quiet plopping sound under my

desk. Hanna doesn't know I'm keeping two toads captive, that I've already got a bit of the other side in my room. It doesn't seem very sensible to tell her now – I don't want her to free them in the lake, to let them swim and see them dive down to the place where Matthies disappeared. Touching them I've finally got something I can hold, even though they feel funny. Luckily Hanna hasn't heard: her head is full of The Plan.

We hear footsteps beneath us. Dad pokes his head up the stepladder. 'Are the two of you reflecting on your sins?' Hanna laughs and I go red. That's the biggest difference between us: she's light and I go dark, ever darker.

'Go to your own bed, Hanna. School tomorrow.' Dad goes back down the ladder. I look down at his parting, and his head looks like a slotted head screw. Sometimes I'd like to bore him into the ground so that he could only do two things: watch and listen, listen a lot.

7

I jolt awake in the middle of the night. My duvet feels clammy with sweat, and the planets and moons on it seem to give off less light. Or maybe they give off the same amount of light but it's no longer enough for me, as the effect is gradually fading. I push away the damp duvet and sit on the edge of my bed. Immediately my body begins to shiver beneath the thin fabric of my pyjamas, and the draught that comes under the door grabs me by the ankles. I pull the duvet over my shoulders and think about the nightmare I had, in which my parents were lying under the ice like two frozen eels, which Farmer Evertsen sometimes gives us, wrapped up in the *Reformist Daily*. Dad always used to say, 'Wrapped up in God's words they taste even better.'

Evertsen was there too. He was wearing his Sunday suit with the narrow lapels and a shiny black tie. When he saw me, he began to sprinkle salt on the ice and he said, 'They'll be preserved for longer like that.' I lay flat on the ice, like a snow angel fallen from heaven, and looked at my parents – they looked like the dinosaur figures in a pot I got for my birthday once that were stuck in a kind of jelly. Obbe and I had dug them out of the jelly with an apple corer. Once they were out there wasn't much point to them: their inaccessibility made

them interesting, like my frozen parents. I tapped the ice, laid my ear to it, and heard the singing sound of skates. I wanted to call out to them but nothing escaped my throat.

When I got up again I suddenly noticed Reverend Renkema standing at the edge of the water in the special robe he only wears at Easter, when all the children from the community walk down the aisle with wooden crosses. An Easter bunny made of freshly baked bread with two currants for eyes hangs on each cross. Before we leave the church, Obbe has often scoffed half of his. I never dare start mine for fear that I'll come home to an empty rabbit hutch, that if I break off its ears, the same will happen to Dieuwertje. I let the bunny go mouldy in my desk drawer. That's less awful. Going mouldy is at least a long process of disintegration. But in my nightmare, Renkema stood there in the tufts of reeds, waiting like a cormorant to peck at something. Before I woke up, he said in a solemn voice, 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. God's plans are your plans.' After that everything went black: the grains of salt beneath me began to dissolve, and I seemed to glide slowly under the ice until I saw a hole in it: the light in the socket in my bedroom, next to the bookcase.

'God's plans are your plans.' Could the pastor be referring to Obbe and Hanna's missions? I turn on the globe on my bedside table, and feel around the floor with my feet until I find my slippers, and smooth the creases from my coat. I don't know what my plan is, except I want Mum and Dad to mate and become happy again one day, so that Mum starts eating

and they don't die. Once I've fulfilled that mission, I can go to the other side with peace of mind. I take the milk pail out from under my desk and glance at the toads that look up at me with drowsy eyes. They seem thinner, their warts whiter, like the pictures of bang snaps that Obbe circles in the fireworks brochure for New Year's Eve – he spends weeks poring over the rockets and fountains to put together the best package. Hanna and I just pick the ground spinners, as we find them the prettiest and the least scary.

I tilt the bucket slightly so that I can see whether they've eaten anything, but the lettuce leaves at the bottom are brown and soggy. Toads can't see motionless things, I know that, and that's why they can starve. I move a lettuce leaf up and down in front of their faces. 'This will taste nice. Eat it up. Eat it up,' I sing quietly. It doesn't help, and the stupid creatures refuse to eat.

'Then it's time to mate now,' I say decisively, picking up the smallest of the two. I gently rub its underbelly over the back of the other toad. I once saw this on a nature programme on School TV. The toads sat on top of each other for days, but there's no time for that now. My parents don't have days left: they lie in our hands like touchpapers waiting for someone to light them so they can give us warmth. While I rub the toads together, I whisper to them, 'Otherwise you'll die. Do you want to die or what? Well?' I feel the webbed feet pressing against my palm. I clutch the toads tighter and tighter and press them together more and more insistently. After a few minutes it gets boring and I put them back in the bucket. I

take a couple of leaves of spinach I stole from dinner out of a paper napkin, and a chunk of toasted bread which has gone soft in the meantime. The toads still look like they're dead. I wait for them to eat but nothing happens. I sigh and stand up. Perhaps they need time, change always takes time. The cows don't just eat a new food mix: you have to add it handful by handful to their old food, until they no longer notice that the pellets are different.

I push the bucket back under my desk with my food, and see a pin lying on the top of it next to my pen pot. It's fallen from my pinboard, from Lien next door's postcard. She sends me a postcard every once in a while because I complained about never getting any post when Dad did – pretty blue letters. I think that some of them are about the Jews. Someone must miss them now they've been in hiding with us for so long? I'd wanted to tell my teacher about them but was worried someone might overhear. A couple of boys in my class are a bit Nazi-ish, especially David, who smuggled his mouse to school once in his pencil case. He kept it hidden among his leaky pens all day and finally let it out during biology, shouting, 'A mouse! A mouse!' The teacher caught it in a trap with some breadcrumbs, where it died because of the shock and all the class's cheers.

Lien next door doesn't write much on the cards she sends. It's often about the weather or their cows, but the pictures on the front are lovely – white beaches, small and big kangaroos, one of Villa Villekulla where Pippi Longstocking lives, and a brave jerboa that has finally dared to swim. I suddenly get

an idea. The teacher once stuck a pin in the world map on the wall at the back of the classroom. Belle wanted to go to Canada because her uncle lives there. It's good, the teacher said, to dream about places you'd like to visit one day. I pull up my coat and shirt until my navel is bare. Hanna's the only one with a sticking-out belly button – a pale bobble like a newborn mouse that is still blind and curled up, the way we sometimes find them under the tarpaulin in the mound of silage grass.

'One day I'd like to go to myself,' I say quietly, pushing the pin into the soft flesh of my navel. I bite my lip so as not to make a sound, and a trickle of blood runs down to the elastic of my pants and soaks into the fabric. I daren't take out the pin, afraid blood will gush out everywhere, and everyone in the house will know that I don't want to go to God but to myself.

8

'You have to keep your buttocks as wide apart as possible.'

I'm lying on my side on the brown leather settee like a breech calf, looking back at my father. He's wearing his blue skipper's jersey, which means he's relaxed and the cows have been nice to him today. I'm anything but relaxed. I haven't been able to poo for days, which has made my belly hard and swollen under my coat, like the Bundt cake my mother sometimes lets rise under a striped tea-towel. The three kings were given Bundt cake on their way back from Bethlehem, and their turbans were used as a mould, which is why it is ring-shaped. I mustn't let go of my poo before we find the star, though even sitting hurts. I can't imagine travelling for hours.

'What are you going to do, Dad?' I ask.

He says nothing, just unzips his skipper's collar a little further. I see a chunk of bare chest. Using his thumbnail, he breaks off a chunk of the bar of green soap he's holding. In panic, I run through the last few days in my head. Have I said a blush word without *Lingo* being on? Have I been mean to Hanna? Before I can think about it any further, Dad has shoved the chunk of soap deep into my bum hole with his index finger. I just manage to smother a scream in the cushion under my face. I sink my teeth into the fabric. I can see the pattern on

the cover through my tears. Triangles. For the first time since Matthies's death, I cry. The lake inside my head empties. Dad pulls out his finger as fast as he's pushed it in. Again he breaks a chunk of soap off the bar. I try to stop crying by imagining that we are playing 'land grab', a game I sometimes play in the village with a couple of classmates. You throw a stick into the opponent's area, and Dad's finger is the stick, it's no more than that. And still I clench my buttocks and look nervously over my shoulder at my mother who is sitting at the kitchen table, sorting out the ear tags of the cows that have died – blue with blue, yellow with yellow. I don't want her to see me like this but there's nothing to hide myself with, though my blushes of shame cover me as heavily as a horse blanket. She doesn't look up from her work, even though we always have to be economical with the soap and the fact it's disappearing inside me, chunk by chunk, must affect her. An ear tag lands on the floor. She bends down, her hair falling in front of her face.

'Open wider,' Dad roars.

Still sobbing, I pull my buttocks further apart with my hands, as though it's the mouth of a newly born calf that has to be held open when it refuses the bottle. The third time Dad sticks his finger inside, I no longer react. I just stare at the sitting room window which has been covered with old newspapers, which is crazy because they like to talk about the weather and now there's not much to see of it. 'To stop Peeping Toms,' Dad said when I asked about it, and actually I could say that about him now, with my buttocks like two open curtains. But according to my father, soap in your bum hole is a tried and

tested method that has been used for centuries on children – in a couple of hours I'll be able to shit again. The last time Dad picked up the bar of green soap, Mum looked up briefly and said, 'Number 150's missing.' She's wearing her reading glasses, and everything far away from her is suddenly close up. I try to make myself as small as Hanna's Playmobil doll, which Obbe once sat on the edge of the settee with another doll right behind it, pushed up to its bum. I didn't understand what he found so funny about it and why he swiped them off the sofa when the elders came to visit. Making myself smaller doesn't help as I only feel bigger, more conspicuous.

Then Dad tugs at the hem of my pants as a sign that the procedure is finished, that I can get back up again. He wipes his finger on his skipper's jersey, and then uses the same hand to take a slice of gingerbread from the dresser before taking a large bite. I get a pat on my lower leg. 'It's only soap.' I quickly pull my trousers back up and raise myself on my knees to close the stud. Then I drop back down onto my side like a cow collapsing on the slats, wiping the tears from my cheeks with the palms of my hands.

'Number 150,' my mother says again. Now she takes off her glasses.

'Shipping disease,' Dad says.

'Poor creature,' Mum says.

Number 150 falls into the tray with all the other dead cows. For a moment I want to see that number which tumbles, tarnished and lonely, and will soon disappear into the filing cabinet never to be seen again. The cabinet gets locked, and

the key hangs on a hook on the side of the cupboard: it's about the gesture, closing something off so that a stall comes free in their heads. I can still feel my father's finger inside. Not long afterwards, the bar of green soap is back in the metal tray on the sink in the toilet. No one will worry about the broken-off chunk that is now roaming about my body somewhere.

When I look at the bar of soap as I'm peeing, I hear Obbe's words about how the unrolled wall of the small intestine has the surface area of a tennis court. When Obbe wants to tease me, he no longer just makes vomiting noises but now acts like he's about to toss up a tennis ball. I feel sick at the idea that a tennis competition could be held inside me and that I'm made up of more space than I actually take up. From time to time, I picture a little man smoothing out the gravel of the tennis court with a dragnet so that a new game can take place inside me and I can poo again. Hopefully the little man won't get green soap in his eyes.

On the table next to the new ear tags, my pale blue swimming costume lies lifelessly across my rucksack, a packet of ready salted crisps and a carton of strawberry yoghurt drink next to it. Sometimes there are crisps on the floor in the swimming pool, and the wet bits stick to your feet like soaked-off blisters and you have to flick them off with the corner of your towel. Later you see them hitching a ride under other people's feet.

'The giraffe is the only animal that can't swim,' I say.

I try to forget the piece of green soap roving about my body,

like I tried to forget my father's finger.

'Are you a giraffe?' Mum asks.

'Now I am.'

'You only have one part of the diploma left to do.'

'But it's the most difficult part.'

I'm the only person my age who hasn't passed their swimming proficiency test, the only one who freezes when I have to go 'swimming through a hole': it's important you can do this, as the winters are harsh here in the village. And even though Dad burned my strap-on wooden skates after that day in December, and it's now mid-May more than a year later, a time will come when I will have to brave the ice again. The holes in the ice are now mainly inside our heads.

'If God hadn't wanted people to be able to swim, He wouldn't have made us this way,' Mum says, putting my swimming costume and the packet of crisps into my rucksack. There's a box of plasters at the bottom. I mustn't forget to put one over my belly button, otherwise the green pin will be visible through my cozzie. Everyone will know then that I never go on holiday, otherwise I'd long for foreign countries, for beaches so white they look like they've been covered in sun cream.

'Maybe I'll drown,' I say cautiously, searching my mum's face in the hope she'll be startled, that more lines will appear in her skin than when she's crying for herself, that she'll stand up and hold me, rock me back and forth like a cumin cheese in a brine bath. My mum doesn't look up.

'Don't be so daft. You're not going to die.' She says it as

though she'd begrudge it me, as though I'm not clever enough to die young. Of course she doesn't know that we, the three kings, are trying to meet death. We caught a glimpse of him with Tiesey, but it was too brief, too fleeting. Besides, if you aren't prepared for it, you don't know what you should watch out for. Good preparation makes the man – God knew during creation that we'd need a day to rest from everything we'd created during the week.

'And we can't go on holiday until you've got your diploma.'

I sigh and feel the pin stick into my navel. The skin around it has turned light purple. Last week they'd put a white tarpaulin across the pool with holes in it, and the divers hung on to the side. The swimming teacher had told us that panic and hypothermia were our greatest enemies. The divers had ice-piercers around their necks to make it look more real. That day at Christmas, Matthies had forgotten his steel-tipped pin for breaking the ice. It was on the little table beneath the mirror in the hall. No one knows that I saw it there, that I considered running after him, but that my anger at not being allowed to go along held me back.

In the swimming pool, Belle pokes me in my side. She's wearing a pink swimming costume; there's a fake Pokémon tattoo on her right arm, the kind you get with two packets of chewing gum and that slowly disappears from your skin, bit by bit. She passed her diploma years ago, and now she's allowed to swim on her own in the pool and jump from the high diving board and go on the big slide.

'Eva's got tits.'

I glance furtively at Eva who is standing in the queue for the big slide. At the start of the school year she whispered to me that I must have got 'spunky' and 'funky' mixed up. Of course she was referring to my coat. Eva's two years older than us, and they say she knows a lot about the things boys like about girls and how to behave. As the end of the swimming lesson, she's always got the most frog sweets in her bag though we all started with the same number. One tip about boys costs two frogs. She's the only one who showers apart. I think it's because of her verrucas, which she says don't exist but I can see them on the sides of her foot, like the mucous glands on my toads, both full of poison.

'Will we ever grow some?' Belle asks.

I shake my head. 'We'll stay tit-less forever. You only grow them if a boy looks at you for longer than ten minutes.'

Belle looks around at the boys who are getting ready to dive through the hole. We're not being looked at, only observed, which is something quite different.

'Then we'll have to make sure they see us.'

I nod and point at the swimming teacher. His hand is feeling for the whistle around his neck. My words seem to get stuck, just like the children who choke up the slide – only the odd one shooting into the water now and again – until it's a train. My body begins to shiver, and the drawing pin rubs against my swimming costume.

'Panic is not an enemy but a warning, the teacher said. That leaves just one enemy,' I say. And just before I get up

onto the starting block, I see Matthies before me. I hear the clatter of his skates, the gurgling of the air bubbles under the ice. The divers said that your heartbeat increases underwater, but I haven't even dived in yet and my heart is beating against my chest like my fists against the ice in my nightmares. Belle wraps her arm around me: we are taught how to rescue people from under the ice, but above water we don't know how to keep someone on dry land, so it's not strange that Belle's arm is heavy and awkward. Her swimming costume is stuck to her body, and I can see the narrow line between her skinny legs. I think about the verrucas on Eva's feet, the way they'll burst open and fill the pool with green poison that will change the divers one by one into frog sweets, croaking.

'Her brother,' Belle tells the swimming teacher.

He sighs. Everyone in the village knows about our loss, but the longer Matthies is away from home, the more people get used to there being just the five of us. Those who are new to the village don't even know any better. My brother is slowly fading out of various minds, while he moves more and more into ours.

I free myself from Belle and escape into the changing rooms, where I put my coat on over my costume and lie down on the bench. It smells of chlorine. I'm convinced the water's going to start bubbling with soap-suds from the chunk of green soap in me. Everyone will point at me and then I'll have to tell them what's wrong inside. I carefully begin to make swimming movements lying on my belly. Eyes closed, I do the butterfly stroke and let myself sink into the ice hole. Soon I realize

that my arms have stopped and I'm only moving my hips up and down. The divers are right: an increased heartbeat and accelerated breathing. It's not hypothermia but imagination that is the enemy.

The bench creaks beneath my belly like black ice. I don't want to be rescued now, I want to sink. Deeper and deeper until breathing starts to become difficult. In the meantime I chew the frog sweets into tiny bits, taste the gelatine, the reassurance of sweetness. Hanna's right: we have to get away from this village, away from the cows, away from death, away from life in its original form.

9

Mum plunges a cumin cheese into the brine bath. It needs to soak for two to five days. There are two large sacks of vacuum salt on the floor next to her. Every once in a while, she throws a large scoopful into the water so that the cheese keeps its flavour. Sometimes I wonder if it would help if we dunked Mum and Dad in the brine bath, if we re-baptized them 'in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit' so that they'd firm up and keep well for longer. I've only just noticed that the skin around Mum's eyes looks yellowish and dull, like the light bulb above the dining table with her floral apron as a lampshade, flicking from light to dark. We mustn't use an angry tone with her, we mustn't be surly and we definitely mustn't cry. Sometimes I think it would be more peaceful if they were ducked forever, but I don't want Obbe to take care of us. There'd be even less of us left then and we're already so few.

From the window of the brining shed, I see my brother and sister walking to the furthest cowshed. They're going to bury Tiesey with the dead chickens and the two stray cats, and it's my job to distract Mum. Dad won't notice, as he's just gone off on his bike. He said he was never coming back. It's because of me. Yesterday I pulled the freezer plug out of the socket to plug