

Sample Translation

Bibi's Bizarre Beastie Book

(Bibi's bijzondere beestenboek)

by Bibi Dumon Tak

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2006)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

The angler fish

What do we keep going up into the sky for? What on earth are we doing up there? We send rockets, space probes and satellites up into the air in search of the smallest trace of bacteria. A drop of water. A spark of life.

But what about closer to home? No one's curious about that. Nobody looks down. And yet it's swarming with life down there. In the inky darkness of the deep sea, there are monsters swimming around that we know nothing about. They have enormous eyes, exceedingly large jaws and teeth like swords.

One of these monsters is the angler fish. The female has an antenna on her head. And at the end of this antenna is a light. In the mind-boggling darkness of the deep sea, where hardly anything can survive, that light seems like a refuge to other deep-sea creatures. They swim towards it and don't see that behind that cosy light is a mouth that goes snap.

Angler fish rarely meet one another, because it's so empty and vast down there that it's like an underwater desert. So when a male swims up to a female, he quickly fastens his teeth into her body and hangs on. And there he hangs for the rest of his life. And because he's ten times smaller than the female, she doesn't really notice. He's a little worm under her belly. No more than that.

The fact that people would rather place a flag on Mars than at the bottom of the sea certainly makes life more peaceful for the angler fish. But why is that the case? It's probably because no one's brave enough.

The black swallower

Just imagine, just suppose, that in the dreadful darkness of the deep sea, an angler fish, her torch dangling in front of her nose, happens to swim into the wide-open jaws of the black swallower – what then? WHAT THEN?

The angler fish is itself a dreaded enemy in the abyss of the ocean. But of course there are always more powerful enemies. The black swallower is one of them. He lies in wait for weeks, sometimes months, without making a sound. But then one day he sees the angler fish approaching in the distance with her little lantern. And before the angler fish has any idea what's going on, the black swallower has closed his merciless jaws around her.

Because when something swims past in the deep sea, he has to strike while he has the chance. Even if the prey he is waiting for is bigger than himself.

This is why the black swallower has an enormous stomach. He floats on it as though it's a gigantic balloon. An infinitely inflatable bag underneath his body.

But his stomach is not only huge, it's also pitch black. This is because the lights of swallowed angler fish mustn't shine through it. Otherwise the black swallower would be gobbled up himself by other predatory fish.

So the black swallower has to remain invisible in the immeasurable depths of the ocean. And he does a very good job. No human has ever even seen him alive. He is a mystery. A cold-blooded killer. But no one sees that there's always a cosy little light shining inside him. It's the light of a gobbled-up angler fish.

The Japanese crane

They're sacred. They bring good fortune, health, a long life. 'Fairytale birds,' say Chinese children when they see a picture of the crane. A picture, because there are very few real cranes left. Their plumage is so beautiful that people used to like to adorn themselves with the feathers.

The Japanese crane dresses in snowy white. So the black feathers around his neck look like a scarf protecting him from the chill of the oriental winter. The red cap on his head completes the look. They are the most graceful of all birds. Tall and slender. Almost as large as a person. When fashion designers lay their eyes upon such elegance, all they can do is tremble with jealousy.

Before the male and female cranes get married, they both first say 'I do' in their own way. They call back and forth to each other and then they dance the most beautiful dance in the whole of the bird kingdom. They run around in circles and figure eights on their stilt-long legs. They jump, they twirl and open their wings. They stretch their necks and then bow to each other like ballerinas. And in the heat of the display they even throw things around. That's right, they use their beaks to pick twigs and pebbles and pieces of grass from the ground and then they throw it all up into the air.

There is a good reason for this bird ballet, this magnificent bridal dance, all this effort. Because a crane marriage is not a flash in the pan. The bride and bridegroom grow very old together. Their marriage sometimes lasts as long as thirty years.

The electric eel

All animals have an official name. A Latin name. A name that is known all over the world. This is handy, because then all of the scientists in all of the countries know which animal they're talking about. Only they're usually names that ordinary people can't pronounce. Real tongue-twisters. And even when you can pronounce them, you don't know what they mean. But when you see the name *Electrophorus electricus*, you've got a pretty good idea.

Mr. and Mrs. *E. electricus* make electricity. So much electricity that you'd better keep out of their way. But of course not everyone manages to do that.

E. electricus is a snake-like fish, with a slimy two-metre-long body. He curls up on muddy river bottoms. He can hardly see anything, but he senses where he is by giving off small electric shocks. And at the same time he senses where other creatures are: the unfortunate ones that he's about to have for dinner, for example.

When he's found a victim, he gives off a surge of electricity. It's so strong that it's even worse than sticking your hand into an electric socket. His prey is paralysed and stops moving. It has to be that way, because the electric eel has no upper teeth. He doesn't gobble up his meals, but slurps them down instead. Slowly and calmly. So it's more convenient if his dinner doesn't struggle too much.

The electric eel doesn't have many enemies. Even people are scared of him. They hardly dare to eat *E. electricus*. He appears to be rather dangerous even after his death. And of course none of us want a mouthful of electricity, do we?

Unless, that is, you're a plug.

The firefly

When the night is muggy and full of the squabbling of owls, crickets and shuffling nocturnal beasties, then you can see them dancing around: fireflies. Their rear ends go on and off. And, every time, what they want to say is: Look at me! Look at me! Look at me! They're like little flickering lanterns. Or stars that are very low in the sky.

And that's how the males and the females find one another. They're not actually flies, but beetles. The more they flicker, the brighter their light, the more they love each other.

In the war, fireflies were used as torches. Soldiers caught them and put them together in a jar. But there were also soldiers who crushed the little fireflies between their fingers. When they had to read something in the pitch darkness, they held their luminous fingers just above the paper. And as a result the soldiers didn't lose their way in the deep, dark forest.

Fireflies are lights in the darkness, not only for one another, but also for people who have lost their way.

The Djungarian dwarf hamster

They either live very far away, or very nearby indeed. They live on the steppes of Mongolia or in a cage at home. You could say that the Djungarian dwarf hamster is a close friend from a long way away.

It is a wonderful little animal. The males do something that no other father in the world does. Something that even our own dads don't manage. When the female Djungarian dwarf hamster has babies, then her husband stands by to help with the birth.

With his little front paws, he carefully pulls the babies out of the mother as they are born. The father immediately takes hold of his new-born children and licks away the slime from around their noses. Then the tiny little hamsters are able to breathe and they change colour, like gobstoppers, from little, purple worms into pink babies.

Meanwhile, the mum's pushing the next child out into the world. Whoosh! The dad's helping hands are there once again. He's busy licking the noses and helping the mother. And while the mother hamster takes a little break between all those births, the father licks his children's bodies dry and drags them with his mouth into the nursery, one by one.

After a year, all Djungarian dwarf hamsters are fully qualified midwives – or should that be 'midhusbands'? Because their wives have babies nearly every month. About six at a time. And yes, that's another thing that our fathers can't manage...

The cockroach

Ugh, the cockroach makes you shiver and shake. When it crawls into your dreams on its spiky little legs, you wake up in a cold sweat. Ugh. People sometimes say that when the world ends, then only the cockroach will remain. Because the cockroach is the strongest creature on earth.

Strong? OK, so one hit with a hammer and you've squished the creepy little horror. But one hit won't do the trick. The power of the cockroach is not in its legs, not in its shell, not in its lightning-quick little body – no, its strength lies somewhere else. In numbers.

Where there's one, there's one hundred, or one thousand. You'd run out of hands and hammers. The cockroach always wins the fight. It can go for a month without eating. It can hold its breath for forty minutes and, as if that weren't enough, it can live for two weeks with no head.

Aargh!

The only places cockroaches don't exist are the North Pole and the South Pole. And they're not fond of high mountaintops. But otherwise they don't really mind. Most of all, they like to sit in nooks and crannies in warm houses. They sleep during the day and at night they go out hunting for leftover food. Not on their own, but all together in a nice, big gang.

Would you like to see some? Then don't do the dishes for a while.

But if you never want to see a cockroach, just buy a one-way ticket to the North Pole.

The flying fish

Is there no end to these bizarre beasties? Do any normal animals actually exist? Animals that do what they're supposed to do? That keep to the rules? Ones that don't show off, but behave normally? It's as though every creature wants to be more bizarre than the next.

So what are flying fish all about, then? Are they perhaps about to start flying? Why can't the creatures just be normal and stay in the water like all the other fish? Do they think that they're birds? Do flying fish perhaps need to see a doctor? Have they completely lost the plot?

No, flying fish most definitely have the plot all worked out!

When a dolphin comes chasing after a flying fish, he could, of course, just allow it to eat him up. That would be the most convenient solution. At least for the dolphin. But the flying fish doesn't think that's convenient at all! He makes a swim for it, so quickly that he comes up out of the water. And as he rises up above the water, he brings out his large fins and glides, glides, glides over the waves.

In the meantime, the dolphin gets into a complete flap. A moment ago it could see this tasty snack shooting through the water and suddenly it's gone!

The flying fish know exactly what they're doing. But those poor dolphins are all thinking: have we really gone mad or do we just think we have? And so it's not the flying fish that crowd into the underwater doctor's waiting room. It's the dolphins!