

Valentijn Hoogenkamp

Antiboy

A moving coming-of-gender tale

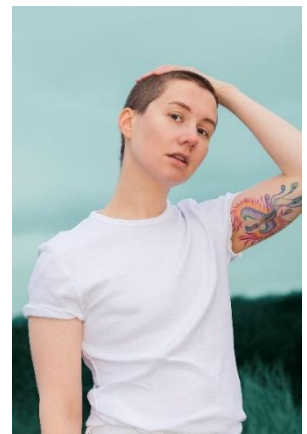
'To be honest, I had no words for it. There was an emptiness there, the feeling I was missing something others had. I didn't feel connected to my gender; it felt like something I put on every morning, not something that reinforced my identity.' – Interview in *Volkscrant Magazine*

World rights: De Bezige Bij • Autofiction • 107 pages • September 2022 • English sample translation available

When, as a result of a genetic mutation, Antiboy discovers he has to undergo a mastectomy, he realizes: now I no longer have to live as a woman. This causes confusion on the part of his doctors, friends, family and partner. Has he always felt this longing? It provokes harsh confrontations with the past and with his loved ones, who are unable to let go of the person they thought they knew. Surrounded by loss and mourning, Antiboy goes in search of hope and the meaning of being oneself.

Antiboy is a provocative and lyrical tale of loss and of finding freedom in transformation.

VALENTIJN HOOGENKAMP (b. 1986) debuted in 2021 to great critical acclaim with the novel *Adoring Louis Claus*, which will be published in 2023 by Atlantik/Campus Verlag in Germany. Furthermore he has written works of theatre and performed poetry at cultural festivals such as Lowlands, Parade and Oerol. His work has been awarded the El Hizjra Literature Prize, nominated for the ITs RO Theatre Award and selected for Women Playwrights International Stockholm and Interplay Europe Madrid.



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I COME FROM a long line of liars. My great-grandmother lied about not being Jewish when she moved to Zaandam from Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, in 1939. My grandmother lied to the man she was married to on Aruba about returning one day, when she fled to the Netherlands with her baby. She left her other child behind, a four-year-old daughter who would later become my mother. My father lied, the time I asked him whether he and my mother loved each other and he said they didn't, they were more like friends, but that was a lie too because it's impossible for me to see his life as anything other than one big attempt to win my mother's affections. My sister Toni, when she claimed that I was the only child to feel emotions and that she didn't.

They are close to me when I wake up from the operation. But it's Pier and Charlotte sitting next to my bed, along with Mum. No, she isn't here, if I ever see her again I'll beat her to death with an emerald. The first time I came round, there was a woman on the other side of the curtain screaming that they'd scraped her baby out of her, and my chest was numb. My mouth hung open, dribble collected in my cheek. Tubes ran right and left from my armpits to two plastic bottles filled with red liquid. I cautiously flapped my arms but barely lifted from the ground.

'I'm awake,' I mumbled.

My throat's sore, a tube's been through it. I was on a ventilator. When was that? This morning.

'They stole my baby,' the woman cries.

'Hush now,' a professional voice reassures her.

I am (*reborn*) awake. I was promised an ice lolly, but the screaming woman has put me off. Her panic seeps through the curtain and that blood doesn't belong in a tube but in me. I just want to get away from here. Sweet Pier is slumped in a chair, when I open my eyes he smiles. He is unbelievably good at smiling. While I was asleep, Charlotte painted me a get-well card with a portable watercolour set. She says she almost became a nurse, instead of an artist, and



helps me drink from a plastic beaker. I try to thank them but blow bubbles of spit.

Once I get a new injection of morphine I'm off like a rocket.

'When the revolution breaks out I think we should use violence,' I say. 'Pier is a pacifist but that's no use, it means others will have to get their hands dirty for him.'

'Violence only brings about more violence, murdering other people is ridiculous,' Pier says and Charlotte shakes her head. She can't believe we're talking about this. Just as he gets up to make a call in the corridor, the doctor arrives for the first check.

I'm asked whether I'm ready to see the wounds for the first time. I feel Charlotte's soft hands on my back as I sit upright, her fingers that open the compression vest, with the doctor's assistance. The pattern of the zip is engraved deeply into my skin, next to two bloodied strips of caked gauze where my breasts used to be.

What a strange place to rupture.

Once the doctor has left, I ask for the purple hortensia in a vase on my set of drawers. A friend brought me the flower, I want to press it with both hands to my flat chest. I float downstream in a canoe carried by waves of morphine, laid out like a corpse on my way to a seaman's grave.

I feel like crying when visiting hours end, but Pier has to appear on a talk show and Charlotte is going to a wedding in Almere. Convinced that I've lost them forever, I lie sweating under a fleece blanket.

My sister told me to stay as long as possible, they have the really good drugs at hospital, and they won't send me home until I can pee on my own. I ring for someone to help me go to the toilet. Nurse Judith is close by when I push myself up and swing my legs over the edge of the bed too fast, but she is too late to catch me when I fall against a chair. The bidons containing wound discharge shoot loose and drip red across the linoleum. White beeping fills my whole head, flashes behind my eyes.

'There's still a bit there,' I whisper to Judith who is busying herself with a cloth. I don't want to sleep in the blood.

When I come to in the dark, a Flemish night nurse is standing at my bedside. He has to check how much fluid is still coming from the wounds and he doesn't understand why one of the bottles is empty and there are no stickers on it. I think I'm explaining the fall clearly, but he has already understood.



‘Ach, our Judith,’ the night nurse sighs as he sticks plasters to my bidons.

I try to make the darkness my ally. In the bed next to me, a phone screen glows and, after hesitating, I also grab my phone and untangle the earphones. In the corridor, a crying man is wandering around; he has Alzheimer’s and doesn’t understand that he’s not allowed to eat or drink. The nurses let him sit with them in lit up night room. The hard plastic plugs keep falling from my ears. With swollen fingers, I try to type in the name of the talk show that Pier is a guest at, but the words all wobbly and who has sent a heart? Heart back almost succeeds, but my fingers are too no Pier has sent a message no a video of presenter Humberto Tan, filmed on Pier’s phone, Humberto telling me to get well soon.

I read in Humberto’s eyes that he likes Pier and is happy to do this for him, so the talk show appearance must have gone well. After the video message silence and black. The darkness is a tunnel in which I call out for my mother, but she drives away on her blue motorbike. Just before she died, she begged for her own mother, and grandma was brought to her in her wheelchair.

‘Mum,’ my mother sputtered, and grandma had wept too: ‘I’m supposed to go first.’

‘Why are you in a wheelchair?’ my mum asked in amazement, undoing the years. Motionless I lie in a hospital bed that long night, missing her and the friends I no longer talk to. The fleece blanket slides down to my ankles. They need to pump up the morphine, please. My mother is somewhere in the dark and when I walk over to her the water comes up to my waist.

The water sucks at my shirt which is swirling around me. Dancing in circles, the smell of stagnant ditch in the sun and flies swarm just above. My boots have filled up and sink into the goo. I pinch my nose and duck down. Underwater it is quiet, no beeps from the drip. A green wringing presses against my eardrums. Lips pinched, eyelids squeezed shut. I am seven and something is wrong with my face. Since I will never have different bones and cannot pull off my skin, I decide to drown myself in the ditch behind the schoolyard. Bubbles escape from my nose and nestle into my eyebrows.

Open your mouth.

No.

Gasping for breath, I launch myself and sink deeper into the muddy bottom, waving my arms wildly, a whistling in my ears. Inhaling, water gushes in, gross and brackish, but the surface breaks. Sand crunches between my teeth, I gag brown water over my shirt.



I hate dying. It fucking hurts. I hate the fact my parents are at work just a few miles away, and my classmates who don't want to play with me. I hate my arms and legs and chin without a dimple. It's shallow here and the water still comes up to my nipples. The ditch gleams greasily in the sun. I slap the oil patches with both hands, harder and harder.

A man gets out of his car in front of the Showboat, a floating swingers club moored further up, he doesn't even look my way. Cars race past on the road next the water, behind them the meadows begin and behind that the sky. The wind sweeps low over the water and I shiver in my wet shirt. I don't think I understood before that you can just fall into a crack like that. Not because people don't love you, but because no one knows where you are.

Slosh slosh slosh my socks on the pavings. My boots left behind in the goo. They were old ladies' boots, my mother has no taste. I am a coward, I think, such an incredible coward. The schoolyard pulsates. Without making eye contact, I walk through the playing children, past the patter of a skipping rope, and with tearful eyes I consider that I could have just gone to the back of the skipping row and waited my turn.

They always stare like that. Everyone can see me standing in the aisle of the school tour bus with my backpack pressed against me. They know why I get to sit in the front next to the teacher even though I never get carsick. No one to walk hand-in-hand to the gym with, to go around the classes with on my birthday.

'Hey, you're all wet,' Jacqueline says. She lowers the skipping rope and comes over to me with the girls. One jumps up to go fetch the teacher and when I lie, saying I slipped next to the ditch, they nod. My hair clings to my cheeks in muddy strands, long hair just like theirs. Their shoulders in cotton shirts, a hand held out to pat my back as though I were choking. I can do this. I have the same arms and legs as them, I am about the same size. I can be one of them.

'TRY ADDING a belt,' Mum said when she saw me drowning in the dress with the rose pattern.

A skinny leather belt that gave me a waist. Her shoes were too big, so I wore white sports socks and insoles, my feet kept slipping. I'd roll up the sleeves of sweaters she passed down to me, but she stubbornly continued to insist that we were the same size.



A year before the breast operation, I spread every item of clothing I own on the floor, all the way to the dining room table's curled wooden legs. It comes from the house I grew up in, and above it my parents' lamp hangs, casting golden circles of light on the table top; in front of the windows their old curtains. Only the sofa is mine, given to me by two people who had let their dogs sleep on it. So many of Mum's dresses, Mum's earrings, Mum's fake pearls.

The woman she wanted me to become delineates herself on the floor, lying here in empty shells of her clothes, among her worn furniture, overwhelming my house. Sitting cross-legged, I stuff the dresses into rubbish bags. Exuberant floral patterns, dots, stripes, everything disappears. I lean against the sofa, which I regularly shift from one corner of the room to the other. Pier gets nervous about that. It's not a big room, the sofa never disappears. Tired, I rub my hair. Put it up, Mum always said. She thought loose hair was unclean, like sticky lipstick. Reaching behind my head, I pull the clip loose, the strands fall over my shoulders and breasts.

'But you're not getting rid of that rose dress, are you, it was your favourite,' her hopeful voice coos. I put it on over my tracksuit, my hands in my sides to create a waist. The girl in the mirror does the same with dull eyes.

My favourite dress, my safety net, the one that came with me to every country and worked everywhere. You really are one of those 1960s girls said a man in his sixties in a party tent on a lawn. The dress that made me not have to talk but be talked to, rested against me so I couldn't leave, that matched my red hair. Have I ever had a normal conversation in that dress? I shake my head, my reflection does not participate, she looks down and smooths the skirt.

'You can still wear clumpy shoes with it,' she mutters. 'It's just a piece of fabric. It doesn't matter, it's not real.'

Is this the face that launched a thousand ships? my English teacher quoted as the sixteen-year-old me breezed into his class with a frown. A round face framed by wavy hair and a dress like a robe to be worn on the forward deck of a warship.

'Thank you,' I say to the red-and-white fabric before fastening the rubbish bag. The roses on the cotton bow their heads.

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I don't believe there's a mysterious person inside me waiting to be discovered. At the same time, ever since she diagnoses a *no*, *I don't want to just survive*,



something wants to reveal itself has been increasing in volume. Nevertheless, there is still a spark of fear that I've made this all up, because I make up characters all day long, I write down their childhood memories, their favourite colours, first relationships, their accent when they talk, how many toilets there were in the house they grew up in and whether they had to queue to use them. I've already invented so many people that my own memories are as vague as fantasies.

I feel the most like myself when I bend down to pick up fallen matches and put them back in a box into which they no longer seem to fit since being dropped.

'Are you going to tell people?' Slimane asks.

'Just Pier to start with,' I say. 'He's always talking about waters enlightened with simplicity and expressing life's space in all its totality.'

'What?'

'Poetry, he quotes a lot of poetry. And he's my best friend after all.'

Slimane gets up to straighten his back and I get up too, taking it as a signal that we're leaving. He wraps his arms around me and smells of the same curl cream. I almost kiss his neck.

The floor is still covered with discarded clothing and torn-open bin bags. I cling onto Slimane's hug, dance around with it elatedly, until I accidentally stand on a plastic pearl necklace, releasing the pearls all over the place. I mustn't lose the clarity with which this all flows over me. Phone in hand, I let myself fall back onto the bed. Pier is away for a month for a writing assignment. Next week I'm going to visit him because he says he's wasting away in the back of beyond where his residency is located. It's cold there, he's bought new tiger print slippers. I miss his little dancing feet, but not his socks lying around. I could wait until I see him again, but I haven't felt this cheerful in a long time. First I tell Pier in my head. He's very enthusiastic, comparing me to still waters. I may not be a girl, but I can be a place in which the sky is reflected.

Reassured, I call the real Pier. We talk about his book, his slippers, the haunted basement in the house he's staying in and the spaghetti he's eating for the fourth day in a row because he cooked too much. There's no logical moment in which to casually drop my news and I almost let it sink away again. We have to be brave and not only tell our exes. So I say it, I say I might be non-binary. Silence at the other end.

'What do you think about that?'



Again he starts talking about his tiger print slippers and his cold feet and I keep asking questions so that the conversation doesn't stall. Is it Spaghetti Bolognese? Yes, with minced meat. How many pages has he written today? Seven, me too, I say, about a bodybuilder who flexes his muscles and wears a pink tank top and... The memory of the mirror is still fading like a dream forgotten upon awakening.

'Would you please say something about it?' I ask.

'I'm not angry with you,' he says and hangs up.

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I AM A MONSTER beneath my skin my love has glasses but can't see this which is why I picked him I sneak along the city's walls the babies cry in their cribs I make a claw in my mitten my love praises my skin so soft in the dark withdrawn teeth when I suck I am a monster I hide my face because nobody is looking in the bus next to me a creature of light with red hair freshly washed red hair I want that too the shower avoids me droplets fall next to me I am a monster hide my eyes the screeching of bald birds bald birds too big for my head beaks pecking into my eyes outside you can't kiss me your tongue is a worm in the tram with an arm so close that I smell another monster smaller ugly with a belly but that doesn't make me more or less of a monster just a different monster I scratch open my scales under them hard skin I grow bigger every year never better never more or less monster once you are a monster it no longer matters whether you are more or less of a monster.

'...aesthetically undesirable,' the plastic surgeon says.

Where are you, Anti? In a windowless consulting room. The doctor with silver hair once won a reality tv show, both the audience prize and the jury prize for the best reconstruction surgery. He explains which implants I might get if I have my own breasts removed. Since the diagnosis, my breasts have been screened every year. Strange hands almost tear them from my body and press them as flat as possible between two Xray plates. A month later, the test results, still clear, nothing to be seen. But the day after the results, the malignant growth can start again and only be visible a year later on the next scan. I have just told the doctor I would rather have a flat chest.



‘... for a young woman like yourself the belly fat option would leave a big scar and you’ll want to look good in a bikini.’

Didn’t I just say I don’t want implants? The conversation is recorded on my mobile phone. As I play it back to understand it better, I sketch the timeline on an envelope. After four minutes, the surgeon, in his pleasantly low voice, calls a chest without breast reconstruction ‘aesthetically undesirable’. After twenty minutes, I am sitting topless on his examination table and he lifts my breast with one hand and drops it again, says I have beautiful breasts and not to go for a single size smaller.

As a child, the only trans women I knew of were on Jerry Springer’s talk show. They were there because their fiancés didn’t know they were trans and they had come to confess. Disgust from the fiancées and the audience. My sympathy was always with the woman being shouted at. They were still the same person, were those men blind? In my child’s mind, all trans people really wanted to have surgery. I thought that if you were afraid of doctors you couldn’t be trans.

‘My father-in-law is a cardiologist,’ I say, ‘and he has a heart himself too, but you don’t have breasts.’

The doctor finds this amusing. ‘Women always think that, but they only know their own breasts. I’ve seen a lot more over the years.’

Still you will never know what it feels like to always have to be confronted with their existence. Cover them, protect them or bare them some more. When mine first appeared I spent the first year forgetting I had them, until a boy in my class intervened, saying I was no longer Fanny Flat-chest and really should start wearing a bra.

‘They don’t really feel like a part of me...’ During the recording you hear my voice get higher; I almost understand what I mean and am hoping for assistance. The doctor’s silence, after his previous smooth answers. Finally he says that in his experience, women who don’t get implants, have a harder time psychologically after the operation. He shrugs off all my questions about risks, leakage, waking up at night and no longer knowing what cold weight hangs from your chest, negligible risks that barely ever occur.

Stay with it, Antiboy, focus and ask clear questions. But the conversation is full of invisible young women frolicking between us in their bikinis. By now we are talking about breasts like hairstyles, that not every hairstyle suits everyone. So I ask for photos of operations he has performed. He clicks open a slideshow showing a pared breast, the skin hanging down over the ribs like a red



flap and the fatty tissue visible. He quickly puts his hand over half the screen and clicks through, past bruises and contusions. Only after many pictures is he able to show me a pair of breasts that look like tennis balls under a sheet. I look at them and try to want them, to want them like those other women do. I've come here with a high risk factor for cancer and the doctor's idea of consolation is to keep telling me I won't be ugly afterwards.

If only I could interrupt him, say, 'Put on all your clothes at once. Pants and vest, shirt, tie, belt and trousers, long socks, jacket, big winter coat or better still, a down-filled ski jacket, a scarf and a fur hat and jump in the water. If everything fills with water and pulls you down, if you tread water until you can barely keep going, then you'll know how heavy my body is. I can tell you love your white coat, even if there's a little coffee stain on the collar, you love to walk along the corridor surrounded by junior doctors. If I were to force you to walk along the corridor in a scruffy tracksuit, or skinny jeans, or, and neither of us can imagine this, a flowery dress, if you had to operate in a flowery dress, wouldn't you explain to each patient, every pair of eyes, 'This isn't who I am'?

But given he is going to add his signature in the form of scars on my chest, I don't say anything and just stare fixatedly at the coffee stain on his collar. Until he explains that if I really insist on being flat, it will be such a simple operation that he will not perform it. He is over-qualified. I have to make a new appointment with another plastic surgeon and explain all over again that I don't want implants that I can't take off when I go to bed.

- *Translated by Michele Hutchison*



Praise on earlier work

‘Longing, for advanced feelers.’ – *De Standaard*

‘There’s no question that Valentijn Hoogenkamp’s beautiful debut marks the start of a long writing career.’ – **** *de Volkskrant*

‘Hoogenkamp’s ingenious composition, snappy dialogues, agile style and deeply felt psychology are as pretty as a picture.’ – *Tzum*

‘Hoogenkamp articulates traumas in a subtle and sometimes confrontational way. He’s particularly good at portraying relationships, bringing tears to your eyes when, within the space of a few sentences, he manages to evoke the powerlessness inherent in them. A beautiful scene in which the protagonist moves to an old school building captures that complexity of feeling very well. Her father, who will now be on his own in the family home, has helped her. ‘Dad was waiting at the front door, looking a little lost. I thanked him and gave him a hug and said, “take care of yourself”. It wasn’t until I swung the big school door shut that I noticed the parking slip in his hand. He’d added money to the meter without letting on that he wanted to stay.’ It’s lines like these that really hit home. *Adoring Louis Claus* is a great debut.’
– **** *Leeuwarder Courant*

