

Sample Translation

Yellow Grass

(Geel gras)

by Simon van der Geest

(Stad: Querido, 2009)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

pages 5–20

Chapter 1

I pop my head through the zip door of my tent and what do I see? Nothing. Our pitch is empty. Mum and Dad are gone. The car's gone. Their big tent's gone. All that's left is my small tent. And the washing-up basin. And the washing line with two red tea towels on it. They forgot them too.

I should have known. I put my tent up in the bushes, hidden away a bit. It's a camouflage colour: leaf green. Almost invisible in the dark. My dad nearly peed up against it one night – 'Oh, sorry, love!' – that's how well I'd hidden my tent.

I grab my flip-flops and crawl outside. My hair sticks to my tongue. I stare at the empty space. A square patch of yellow grass marks the spot where the tent once stood. I stare and I stare and I stare, but I don't have a clue what's happened. Thousands of questions, thousands of thoughts whizz through my mind. It makes me feel a bit woozy.

Mum and Dad are in the car now. I can hear Mum saying, 'You know, I really do feel as though we've forgotten something.'

And then Dad saying, 'You always say that.'

And Mum saying, 'That's because we always forget something.'

And Dad muttering, 'It's bound to be something small. Let's just forget that we've forgotten something.'

It's not the first time. They forgot me last summer on the beach as well.

I'd buried myself and just had my head and one arm sticking out above the sand. I thought it was impossible to dig yourself any deeper into the sand. But then I had a bright idea about how to bury the other arm too: wiggle your fingers into the sand and then hold a spade between your teeth and use it to chuck sand over your arm.

I saw my mum in the distance folding up the deckchairs and then traipsing off. My dad sauntered after her. I wanted to call out to them, but there were four boys playing football nearby. If I shouted, they'd be sure to look at me and come running over to find out what was going on. And I didn't want to run that risk: with just my head sticking up out of the sand like that, I probably looked just like a football. So I pretended my mouth was a flashing alarm signal. Open, shut. On, off. Quiet as a mouse, because I didn't want the football boys to notice. But Mum and Dad didn't see it either.

Just as it was starting to get dark, a fat lady came and set me free. She was no good at digging. It took her ages. I couldn't really help much myself, because my muscles had melted. I think my brain was a bit fried too. My thoughts were going round and round in circles. The lady was talking so quickly, shaking her head and jabbing her fat fingers in the air. She was speaking French, but if I watch their arms and faces closely, I can understand it fine. She thought it was awfully clever, the way I'd managed to bury my other arm. She'd never have got any further than both arms up above the sand. As she kept demonstrating. I explained to her that you have to hold the spade between your teeth and I showed her how to do it. Her eyes nearly popped out of her head and she mumbled something. I think she said, 'What an incredible stroke of genius.' She took me back to the campsite.

Mum and Dad had a shock when they saw us. The lady was very angry that they'd left such a brilliant young girl behind on the beach, a girl who had managed to bury both of her arms, when most people didn't get further than one arm or even no arms at all.

She put her fat hand on my shoulder and it felt a bit like she was my mum too. That gave me the shivers. Having two mums sounded as though it might get really complicated. When you had a nightmare and you had to call one of them, which one would you call? Or would you call both of them? And would they both sing you a song? A French song and a Dutch song, all mixed together?

Now I have zero mums. I gob a big greenie at my tent. If only the tent had been purple. Or bright orange. Or a sparkly one. Then they'd have noticed it. Then they wouldn't have just gone driving off into the distance.

I wander over to the yellow patch of grass. I stand in the middle of it. That's where the camping stove was. And the box of food was there. The box of games was over there. Here's where my mum slept. And my dad slept here. I think I might just have a little cry now. I've no idea what else to do.

I drop down onto the ground.

The grass is a good place to cry. It's really stinky, which makes me even more miserable. I blow out a huge snot bubble.

This is a really good place to be seen as well. If a fat lady comes past, she'll be sure to spot me. I keep a close eye on the path.

No fat ladies come past.

No thin ones either.

The only creature to come by is a dog. He's taking himself for a walk and dragging his lead behind him.

The sun's stinging my neck. And the stink of the yellow grass is making my nose itch. A worm pokes its head up out of the ground. I grab hold of it and try to pull it up.

'You were here the whole time, weren't you?' I growl. 'So why didn't you warn me? Well?'

The worm squirms and tries to escape, but I don't let go. Its body gets thinner and thinner until... it snaps.

'Stupid creature,' I say to the half that's now wriggling around in my hand. Yuk. I didn't mean to do that. I really didn't, not at all. Yuk, yuk, yuk. I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes again.

I gently lay the half-a-worm back beside its hole. 'Go on. Just follow your other half. You might still be able to catch up with it.'

How far away would Mum and Dad be by now? Five miles? Fifty? A hundred? If I hung something up very high, they might just spot it in the rear-

view mirror. Or if they happened to look round. It'd have to be something eye-catching, something that would make them think, 'Hey, that belongs to Fee. Oh yes... Fee, our daughter! That's it! She's what we've forgotten!'

I get up, wipe my nose on the back of my hand and look around. The castle on the hill that we visited yesterday is the highest point around here. So that's where I need to go.

Chapter 2

I quickly pull on my shorts and a top. I pick out my most colourful jumper. The bright pink one. I race to the campsite entrance. I can still remember the route we took yesterday: down the road a bit, past the wood and then through the village.

This is the way I went with Dad only yesterday. Our visit to the castle was cut short, which was mostly Dad's fault. This is what happened. The castle has a museum and we were in one of the rooms, looking at this display of dummies in medieval costumes: a few damsels and henchmen and whatnot, and there was a complete suit of armour too, which Dad seemed to find particularly interesting. He was leaning forward and, as usual, spending far too long peering at the information sign.

'Look out, Dad! It's moving!' I shouted, which was obviously rubbish, but Dad was so surprised that he threw up his fists to defend himself and bopped the armour on the nose. Cling clang clong! Off with its head!

'Fee!' Dad growled. 'That. Was. Not. Funny!'

The helmet made so much noise as it clattered to the floor that the whole museum must have heard it. An angry voice shouted something from one of the other rooms and we heard footsteps approaching.

Dad picked up the helmet and tried to put it back on the suit of armour, but it kept slipping off. 'What am I going to do with this thing?!' he hissed.

'Just put it on,' I whispered. It seemed like the only sensible solution.

'Me?! You want *me* to put it on?!'

'Yes, I don't look anything like a knight. I'm too short. Put it on and go over there and stand with the others,' I whispered. The footsteps were getting very close now. Dad muttered and grumbled as he went over to join the dummies. Then a man came storming into the room just as Dad managed to get the helmet on. The man was wearing an important jacket with important buttons. Dad stood perfectly still and I pretended I was reading the sign. The important man looked around the room, but he didn't seem to notice anything was wrong. I thought Dad

looked pretty cool myself. He was the very first knight in shorts I'd ever seen. So the museum seemed like the right place for him. Unfortunately, the important man stayed on guard in the room, so Dad couldn't move. The man even sat down on a chair, with his arms folded. I waited for a little while, but it was getting dull.

'I'm just going to take a look at the other rooms. See you later, Dad,' I whispered, 'and don't move, eh?'

Half an hour and four rooms later, Dad came to find me. 'Fee, back to the campsite. Now.' He grabbed me by the shoulder and hardly even looked at me. His hair was all over the place and he had a red line across his forehead. He didn't say a single word on the way back. He didn't even thank me for my clever rescue plan. Grown-ups are so weird sometimes. You rescue them and they don't even mention it. And then, the next day, they just vanish.

I have a shaky feeling in my tummy. It all feels so long ago. Mum and Dad could be miles and miles away by now. I start running faster.

When I get to the woods, I pick up the biggest branch I can find and drag it along behind me. It's more like a tree. It's so heavy. The branches and twigs scrape noisily along the road surface. I have to use all of my weight to keep it moving.

Left past the village butcher's. And then up the big hill. A few of the French people in the village point at me and my tree as we go by. I can feel my muscles bulging.

Going uphill is hard work. The tree's heavy and the branches leave deep tracks behind in the path. I have to keep stopping to catch my breath.

The wooden bridge to the castle has an iron gate with spikes on it. The gate's open. Over the bridge, around the corner of the castle gates, there's a man in a ticket office. He taps on the window, points at my tree and shouts something.

'In the woods,' I reply. 'But this one's mine. You can't have it. There are loads more of them there though.'

When I carry on walking, he taps on the window again. With a sigh, I put down my tree and press my nose against the window.

‘No,’ I say. ‘I dragged it up the hill all by myself. If you want one, you’ll have to go and fetch it.’

I drag my tree into the castle. Behind me, the man taps on the glass, harder and harder. What a nag!

I walk through the gateway into the courtyard. The museum’s on the right, but that’s not where I need to go right now. I’m going up. It’s really difficult climbing the stairs with the tree and it’s pretty scary with no handrail to hold on to. A man in a hat and a woman in sunglasses see me struggling, but they don’t come to help. The woman just nudges the man and takes photos of me and my tree.

At the top of the stairs I have to stop again to catch my breath. To get to the tallest tower, I have to cross another bridge, go through a door and up a spiral staircase.

The spiral staircase has big steps. It’s dark and cold and smells of dishcloth. My tree gets stuck halfway up the stairs. I have to pull really hard. My tree moans and groans. A few branches snap off. Then it suddenly slips free and takes me with it. I fall over backwards and hit my bum on one of the steps.

Up at the top of the tower the sun is shining even more brightly. There’s a wall all the way around and I can only just see over the top. The fields of sunflowers look like sheets of yellow cloth. The houses are scattered over the hill, like crumbs, with roads winding between them, like little threads. Beyond the village, I can see our campsite, with tents sprinkled all over it, like brightly coloured hundreds and thousands.

I’ll have to get the tree upright, against the wall. First I need to tie the sleeves of my pink jumper to the highest branch. If they don’t see this flag, they must be blind.

I spit in my hands, bend down and grab hold of the trunk. A loud grunt – that’s what weightlifters always do – and... heave!

It works. I get it up above my head. But I can't get it any higher than that. And it's still nowhere near upright. Oops. Stuck. I'm stuck between the tree and the floor. Mustn't fall over now. Or let the tree slip from my hands. It might drop onto my toes. The bark is scratching the palms of my hands. My shoulders are creaking. I have to do something. Now.

Then I see two big eyes appearing out of the hole in the floor. They're peering through a pair of binoculars, and they're followed by the head of a tall, thin man. The binoculars stop. They stare at me.

Don't just stand there staring at me! You can see I can't hold this up anymore, can't you?

My arms are already starting to tremble, as though they're giggling nervously, but giggling never hurts, and this does.

Finally the man steps out from behind his binoculars and dashes over to help. Just as I'm about to collapse.

He takes hold of the tree and goes to put it back down on the ground.

'No, no!' I shout, waving my arms. 'Up! It has to go up!'

Together we get the tree to stand upright.

We look up at my flag. It looks pretty fine. The jumper's billowed out in the wind, as if there's a fat, invisible Fee inside it. The branch is holding tightly on to her and she's waving in the wind. Just like that day at the lake, when Dad kept swinging me round by the arms, again and again. I'd run up to him, he'd grab hold of my arms and then spin me around and around and around, and then suddenly... he'd let go. For a few seconds I flew through the air, completely free. I tried to keep gliding on for as long as possible by flapping my arms like wings. And then splash, and I'd swim back for more as quickly as I could.

Now that the flag's up, they're bound to be here soon.

Binoculars man says something in French. He obviously thinks I was very clever to get the tree all the way up here.

'Oh, you know, it wasn't so hard,' I say.

His mouth's hanging slightly open, but he's run out of things to say. He has spiky blond hair. I don't know what to say now either.

I point at the binoculars hanging on his tummy.

'Could I have a go?' I ask.

As he pulls the strap over his head, his glasses get tangled up and slide off his nose. He quickly pushes them back up. At first all I can see through the binoculars is blue, but then a church tower appears lower down, and houses, and a bridge.

'Which way is the Netherlands?' I ask the man.

The man wiggles his head. 'Kwah?' he says. French people really do sound just like frogs sometimes.

'The Ne-ther-lands. Hol-land,' I say. 'Amsterdam.'

'Ah!' he cries. 'Amsterdam!' He points.

I turn the binoculars in that direction and focus my eyes, looking for the red of our car. Red. I'm looking for red. A red Volvo, which is probably just turning around now.

I can't see any cars at all. I can't even see a motorway. These binoculars are rubbish. Just as I'm about to hand them back, I notice something red fluttering down there. It's not a car. It's a red jumper. On a stick. Another jumper flag. A boy's waving at me with a red jumper flag.

Chapter 3

And of course I wave back. The man has to help me, because waving with a tree is pretty hard work.

I look through the binoculars again. The man wants to take a look too, but I put my hand on his stomach to hold him back. I saw the boy first.

The boy's still waving inside the circle of the binoculars. Then a lady in a pale brown dress walks into the circle. She puts her hands on her hips. The boy carries on waving. She takes his flag and walks out of the circle. I can't really make out what the boy's doing now. He still appears to be waving, but with his arms now. Why did he wave back at me with his jumper flag? Does he have a message for me? From my parents? 'They haven't forgotten you! They've just popped round to visit me!' Or maybe it's bad news. 'You mustn't try to make them come back. They deliberately left without you. They'd had enough of you. They're going to pick up a brand-new child somewhere on the way home.'

The wobble of the binoculars is making me dizzy. I can't seem to hold them still anymore. The man starts grumbling and saying it's his go. I give the things back to him.

'Kwah?' he croaks again. And he says 'Oo' too.

I point and draw a circle in the air round about where I think they must be.

The man croaks again. I shrug my shoulders. He shrugs his shoulders back at me. He looks at me again with his half-open mouth and scratches his spiky hair. He points at the flag. Wants to know whether we're leaving it up there.

'Yes, yes,' I say.

If the boy really has something important to say, he'll have to come here. It's best if I keep watch up here.

'I have to keep watch,' I say to the man. And I stand bolt upright and salute like a guard: thumb to the forehead and a nice, crisp snap of the hand. The man chuckles and returns my salute. He goes back down through the hole.

His spiky hair is the last thing I see. Then the hole is just a hole again.

I have to stay here.

I have to wait for the important message.

I look out over the fields. This country is so big; there are so many hills and valleys and roads and bridges and houses and churches and castles. The more I look, the bigger and wider and huger the country becomes, and the more I shrink. So here I stand, at the top of a tower, a tiny little girl, in the middle of France.

Everything around me seems to be going more slowly. The tiny cars, the little people, they hardly seem to be going anywhere at all. As though time has shrunk too. If only time would start going backwards. Just imagine. I can already picture myself running backwards in speeded-up motion, as I leave the castle, taking my tree with me, and head down the hill, through the village, to the campsite, back inside my tent and into my sleeping bag. Stop the clock. Nothing wrong.

I drop down onto the ground and lean against the wall. I hug my knees. I think about last night again.

Not being able to sleep.

Hearing Mum and Dad laughing their heads off. Like a couple of little girls.

Knowing there was no point in joining them because they were a bit drunk and when they're drunk they just make stupid jokes that you don't get.

Deciding to start sleepwalking. Just to see what they'd do. See if they'd come and rescue me.

And I can see myself stumbling out of my tent, with my arms stuck out in front of me like a zombie and my eyes narrowed into slits. They were sitting at the table, in the light of the lantern. Finally they stopped laughing. Mum whispered, 'Don't wake her up. It's dangerous. She might get stuck like that.'

At first they just stared at me gormlessly. It was only when I was heading straight for the guy ropes that Mum came running. Her gentle arms hugged me tight. I went floppy and let her pick me up and carry me. Mum put me on her lap and rocked me backwards and forwards. Dad wanted to say something, but Mum said 'Ssshhh' and they were both silent. I lay there in Mum's arms and I felt as though I was six years old again, but that didn't bother me at all. She rocked me

backwards and forwards and she smelled of wine and cigarettes and she hummed quietly and I didn't want it to ever, ever stop, but I must have fallen asleep. Mum must have put me back in my tent.

If only I'd stayed awake all night. Then they'd never have left without me. How could they forget me like that? Or did they do it on purpose? Did they run away? Were they really shocked to find out they had a sleepwalking daughter? And was Dad still angry about having to stand still in the museum? Is it all my fault?

pages 83–90

Chapter 19

‘What are you up to now?!’ Yantwan squeaked.

‘We’re going to stay in here. I have a plan.’

Explaining all of the details takes a long time. Yantwan keeps interrupting to say ‘Yes, but,’ or ‘You can’t do that,’ and squawking whenever the doves pitter patter into him. When I’ve finished, he goes silent for a really long time. I stare into the darkness: Yantwan doesn’t seem to be moving.

‘Right then,’ he says. ‘So all we have to do is wait.’

‘Mmm,’ I say. ‘Real stars often have to wait as well. In their dressing rooms.’
So that’s what we do. We wait.

The wood’s really hard and it’s starting to make my bum ache.

‘And what if it all goes wrong?’ Yantwan says.

‘Then we’ll come up with a new plan.’

He sighs. We wait.

‘Don’t you ever get scared in the dark?’ he asks.

I move to a squatting position. ‘No. I love the dark. It improves your sense of hearing. And your sense of smell.’

‘But what about the doves?’

‘They’re pretty used to the dark, I think. They’re only a bit scared of us now.’

We sit in silence. Sometimes being locked up together can be fun. We focus our eyes and our noses. Doves smell like toast and lofts. Yantwan is remarkably silent; I can’t even hear his whistling breath.

I hold out one hand. Flutter, flutter. A flurry of air by my hand. I get a little shock when I feel a beak. The dove hops up onto my hand. And then my head. It wriggles around in my hair. It feels nice.

‘I’ve got one on my head,’ I whisper.

‘I’ve got two,’ Yantwan giggles. ‘They’re digging in my hair... It tickles.’

‘They’re building a nest,’ I say.

That must be handy. When you’re a bird, you can build your nest anywhere. Wherever you go. Even in the hair of a boy inside a cake in a tent. And that’s your home. And when that nest disappears, like if the boy washes his hair, for example, then you just go and build yourself a new home.

‘Fee?’

‘Yes?’

‘When we get... erm... famous, and we’re back in Holland, will you come and visit me?’

‘Of course.’ Carefully, without scaring away the dove on my head, I change position. ‘Of course...’ I don’t know what else to say. My cheeks are burning. Just as well he can’t see my face.

‘The first thing I’m going to do when I’m famous is swim in the lake.’

Pffft! A wet plopping sound.

‘Oh, gross! My hair!’ says Yantwan.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘They’re making themselves at home.’

I can’t hear my dove now. I hope it’s fallen asleep.

I’ve no idea how long we sit there for. Maybe an hour, maybe two. We imagine all the things we’re going to do when we’re famous, while trying to make as many doves as possible walk over us.

When we hear footsteps, we go absolutely silent. The cake starts moving. The doves are fluttering and flapping around. I hold on tight. The wheels make a deafening noise as they rattle over the cobbles. The doves coo anxiously. We’re bouncing all over the place. Then we tip to one side and Yantwan rolls into me. We’re going uphill now. The men are gasping and grumbling.

When the cake finally comes to a stop, I feel sick. I peer through the crack.

We’re up higher than everyone else and can look out over the whole square.

My heart stops.

Wherever I look, I can see people, hundreds and hundreds of people in red, white and blue. Ladies in long dresses, men in white shirts and red braces, girls

with red, white and blue ribbons in their hair. An endless, endless crowd of people. And an endless number of eyes, all of them looking at me.

My stomach climbs up into my throat and my throat sinks down into my stomach. I can feel my heart beating all the way down to the tips of my fingers. My breath shifts up a gear or two and hides away nervously somewhere in the back of my throat.

There, at the side of the crowd, are the three boys who were chasing me. That's all I need. Even they're dressed in red, white and blue. Yantwan gently pushes me out of the way and peeps outside.

'That dress... it's my mum! My mum's out there! At the back over there! Now I'll show her.'

I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. Hundreds of people flash past before my eyes. Red-white-blue. Red-white-blue. Red-white-blue.

'MEDAM AY MISHOOR...' bawls a voice through a microphone.

Yantwan takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. 'Are you ready?'

I shake my head. He doesn't notice. He scrambles to his feet. A beam of light slides over his face and he grins.

My bones are spaghetti and my knees are made of custard.

'I don't want to do it now.'

I've run out of voice.

'Eh?'

'My body's not working.'

'But... it was all your plan!'

'Stupid plan. Stupid knees.'

'No. That's not true. It's a good plan. A brilliant plan.'

There's a burst of applause on the square.

'Err... but I can't do it now, because those stupid boys are out there,' I say, coming up with another excuse.

'Don't worry about them. They wouldn't dare do anything to a celebrity.'

'All of those people,' squeaks my voice.

‘Look, I’d do it, but I’m too heavy. Don’t think about the people. Think about the papers, the TV news.’

Suddenly I feel really sick.

‘Think about your mum and dad and how surprised they’re going to be when they see you on TV.’

I roll myself into a ball and curl up in the corner. This is a thousand times worse than having to do a presentation at school.

The microphone voice blares on.

‘I just don’t get it,’ Yantwan says. ‘What about all the other things you’ve done? You were brave enough then! The fence with the spikes. The sea witches. Even hiding inside this cake!’

‘It’s over. I’m done,’ I say.

Yantwan takes hold of my arm and pulls me to my feet. He bumps his head against a beam of wood and the doves flutter and flap. The two of us can only just stand upright and we still have to stoop a bit.

His face is really close now. I can feel his breath. A chink of light falls on his eyes. Wild ocean green.

‘Fee, don’t pay any attention to those people. The doves aren’t.’

The microphone voice has stopped speaking. Everything outside is completely silent. Yantwan puts his hands together in front of his stomach and makes a step for me. I put my hands on his shoulders. I take a deep breath. And I think about the waves of the sea and the mandarin moon.

The microphone yells something.

‘Yes. Now!’ Yantwan hisses.

I push the lid aside and blink in the bright light. The doves are flapping wildly around our feet. I put my foot in his hands, push myself up, and stand on his shoulders. Up into the light, until I’m sticking out of the cake from my knees up. Yantwan holds me firmly by the calves.

A thousand eyes are staring at me.

Chapter 20

I try to look away, but the thousand eyes hold me transfixed. I've turned to stone. I can feel it. I'm not a girl anymore. I'm a statue.

Eyes stare, mouths gape. No one moves. The cake is right at the front of the stage. If I faint now, I'll tumble forwards, down through the whipped cream and into the crowd. Maybe that's what I should do.

Beneath me, I hear Yantwan groan. He's pinching my calves. He's wobbling and I'm swaying and my legs are rubbing on the wooden edge.

'Don't just stand there! Fly!' he whispers.

My yoghurt muscles tug at my arms. I was right. I've turned into a statue. Feathers brush against my legs. A dove slips out past me. Its wings make a rustling sound.

My arms start moving. I spread them. Flashes of white... Two doves fly out of the cake, past my head. People are pointing, at me and the doves. I flap my wings. The rest of the doves slip out past me, one by one, and fly into the blue sky. It tickles.

'Oh...' sighs a woman in the crowd. 'Ohhhh...' everyone else agrees. The doves flutter, I open up my wings, and every single person in the crowd says, 'Ohhhh.' Even the three boys with long hair are staring at me with their mouths open. I flap faster, with even bigger wings. My muscles are waking up.

'Now for the lift,' I whisper down to Yantwan.

Yantwan lowers me down, gasps, then pushes me back up high. Down, up, down, up. People start clapping. The applause begins like a gentle shower of rain, then builds up and washes over me. A giggle rises from somewhere deep in my tummy. I could happily become famous like this every day.

Yantwan groans. 'Hnng... I can't keep this up...'

'Launch me,' I say.

'What?!'

'Launch me.'

‘But that’s dangerous!’

‘I’ve seen them do it on TV. Go on. Just do it.’

Yantwan lowers me down. I bend my knees, spread my wings... With a yell,
Yantwan fires me up into the air. I leap and I’m flying.