

Sample Translation

Cheep!

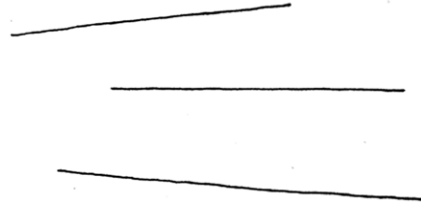
(lep!)

by Joke van Leeuwen

(Amsterdam: Querido, 1996)

Translated by Lance Salway

TAKE THREE LINES.



BEND THEM SLIGHTLY.



PUSH THEM TOGETHER.



AND YOU HAVE THE LANDSCAPE
IN WHICH THIS STORY BEGINS.

THE SUN IS SHINING OVERHEAD
BUT IT WON'T FIT ON THE PAGE.
THERE ARE BUSHES AS WELL, AND TREES.



AND PATHS.



PEOPLE WALK ALONG THE PATHS,
AND SO DO BEETLES AND SNAILS.
THE BEETLES AND SNAILS DON'T
REALLY KNOW THAT THIS IS
WHAT THEY ARE DOING. BUT PEOPLE DO.
LIKE THE MAN IN THE DISTANCE.
HE'S LOOKING AT THE BIRDS. AND HE KNOWS IT.

1

Warre loved birds. He thought that watching birds was one of the finest things you could do in your life. Much nicer than looking at pictures or watching television.



Every day he walked through the landscape near his house. This landscape looked like three curved lines with bushes and trees and paths, with the sun overhead, if it was a good summer.

He always carried binoculars with him, because birds don't like you to come too close. And he had a bird book. In this book were listed all the birds for miles around. With their names, colours and faces.

(Do birds have faces? Or is it just people who have faces? Some animals look as though they have faces. And there are some people who look like animals.)

Whenever Warre saw a bird, he looked to see if it matched the picture in his bird book. And if it did match, then he got a warm feeling deep inside, somewhere around his middle. He wished that there was a book like this for the whole world and that everything matched.

One day, when Warre was walking through the landscape as usual, he happened to look underneath a bush. This wasn't something he usually did. He usually just looked up into the sky. Or into the trees. Certainly not under any old bush. But now he was doing exactly that. He thought at first that he could see a

bird lying there, a big bird of prey. But it was something different, something that wasn't in his bird book. It was something with wings, that was for sure. And feet. They were feet that looked a lot like little legs, like little legs with little toes on them, with little nails on the little toes and a little bit of dirt under the little nails on the little toes on the little legs.

What Warre saw lying there looked for all the world like a human baby. Only it had feathers instead of clothes. And there were two wings where the arms ought to be. Yes, really.

For a moment Warre thought that a little angel had fallen down from heaven. But he knew perfectly well that it couldn't be an angel, because angels had arms. They had wings on their backs and their arms were where their arms were supposed to be. At least, this is what people have always thought that angels look like.



No. It was a bird shaped like a little girl. Or a little girl shaped like a bird. Or something in between.

She was asleep. Perhaps she's been abandoned, thought Warre. People had been doing that sort of thing for centuries. If they didn't have enough money, or if

they felt that their child didn't fit in, they'd leave it somewhere to be found. In a doorway. Or in a cardboard box. You also see grown-up people lying in doorways and in cardboard boxes, but that's quite different. No one thinks that *they've* been left there to be found.

Birds never abandon their young.

Warre picked up the little creature and cradled it in his arms. After a moment two little eyes opened and then quickly closed again. He looked down the path, to the left, to the right, and then to the left once again.

He saw no one. Just two beetles.

'Hey there!' he called. 'Does this belong to anyone?'

No one answered. A bird gave a little squawk, but he knew that bird well. It was in his book.

He ran up and down as fast as he could. 'I'm taking it with me! D'you hear? I'm taking it with me!'

And he took the bird-girl home with him. His arms were bent, so that they looked a bit like a nest. The binoculars swung back and forth on his back.

This doesn't match anything, he thought as he went. I can't believe that it really exists.

But it existed, all right. He could feel it.



2

Warre lived in a small house behind the hills, together with his wife Tina. It was a house full of cracks. If someone was making soup while you were lying in bed, you could smell it right away. But most of the time no one was making soup, because you don't usually feel like soup when you're in bed.

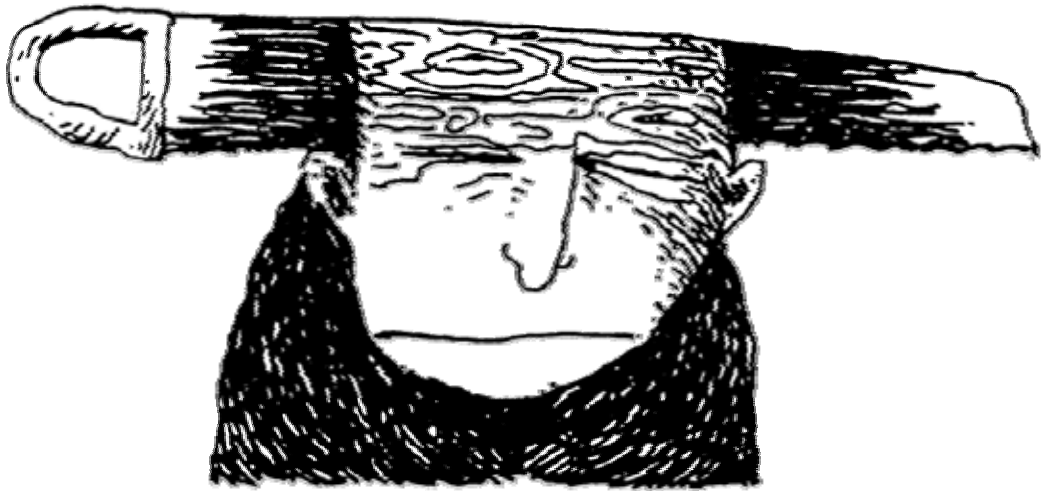
Warre came in with his arms full. Tina didn't notice him at first, because she was watching television. On it people were talking to each other about dreadful illnesses.



About nasty wrinkles.



About terrible spots.



About unbelievable headaches.

All this made Tina forget for a moment that she was perfectly fine.

‘Have a look at this,’ said Warre.

Tina looked round.

‘What on earth have you got there?’ she said.

‘I found it,’ said Warre.

Tina stared at the bundle in Warre’s arms. She prodded it carefully.

‘This can’t be right,’ she said. ‘It’s got wings.’

‘Yes,’ said Warre. ‘And it’s got legs.’

‘Was it just lying there?’

‘Yes. It was just lying there. And there was no letter with it. All the same, I asked round if it belonged to anyone but it didn’t.’

Tina took the foundling in her arms. She had a look to see if the wings really were attached.

‘She’s alive,’ she said.

‘Yes,’ said Warre. ‘So she really does exist.’

‘I want to keep her,’ said Tina.

She stroked the little sleeping head.

‘Shouldn’t we hand her over to the police? Isn’t that what you’re supposed to do with foundlings?’

‘You only have to do that if it’s a person,’ said Warre. ‘You don’t need to do it if it’s a bird.’

‘But this one isn’t in your bird book, surely?’

‘No. It’s much too rare for that. Perhaps there’s only one of them. I think they used to exist a long time ago.’

‘It looks more like a person than a bird,’ said Tina.

‘Take a good look,’ said Warre. ‘It’s got two legs. They look like human legs but a bird has two legs too. It’s got a head. It looks a lot like a human head but a bird has a head too. And it’s got two wings. All birds have those but people never do. So that means it’s more of a bird.’

‘Well,’ said Tina, ‘you can treat it like a bird, if you like, but I’m going to treat it like a person. She needs some milk and bits of fruit.’

‘And grain. Try her with some grain too.’

Suddenly the foundling opened her eyes. And her mouth. Her face turned red with effort.

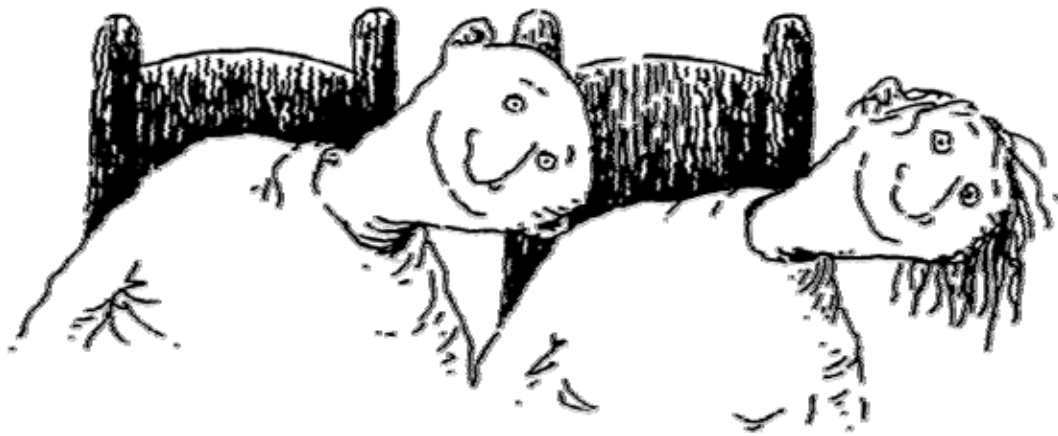
‘Eep,’ came bursting out. ‘Eep.’

And that was all.

3

In the shed behind the house Tina found an old basket that looked like a little bed, but also like a nest. She dressed the birdlike little girl in a shirt of Warre's and laid her in the basket, with a pillowslip as a sheet.

Warre fetched two kitchen chairs. They sat down side by side and gazed into the basket. Because you need time to get used to something new in your house.



'No one must find out about it,' said Tina. 'It's too unusual. People always want to have something that's unusual. We must hide her wings.'

'Yes,' said Warre, 'we must hide her wings.'

They carried on gazing for a while, without saying anything.

Then Warre said: 'We must give her a name. Birds have names too, though not many people know what they are.'

'No, it mustn't be a bird name,' said Tina. 'Not one of those difficult Latin ones. They're too hard to say.'

'Nonsense,' said Warre. 'Some birds have names that you can say quite easily. Robin, for instance, or blackbird or whinchat or siskin or goldfinch or heron or wagtail or grebe or linnet or flycatcher.'

'Flycatcher?' said Tina. 'What an ugly name. I'd like something nicer than that.'

‘The best thing,’ said Warre, ‘is that we’re the ones who can think of a name for our foundling, because we’re the ones who found her. And I don’t think this breed has a name yet, because it isn’t in my book. We can give her our own name, because that’s what happens when you discover something. If you discover a disease, for instance, then you give it your own name.’

‘Surely no one would like to be named after a disease? I wouldn’t want to have the same name as a disease. And anyway, why are you talking about diseases all of a sudden? We were having such a nice time and now you’ve suddenly started going on about diseases.’

They tried a great many names. They said the names out loud while looking in the basket, to see if any of them suited her. Fly, they said, and Flicker and Bicycle Bell (‘What gave you that idea?’ ‘I’m just trying it out’).

They tried Chirpie, and Flutter and Flitter and Cheep and Diana.

But in the end they named her Birdie. And they were both happy with that.

(‘But what about Chirpie?’)

(‘No, no.’)

(‘All right then.’)

4

Warre and Tina bought some clothes for Birdie, which fitted her at the bottom but not at the top. Tina cut big holes at the top so that the wings could stick through. Then she made a wide cape, a sort of flapping jacket, which covered Birdie completely so that no one could see that she had wings.

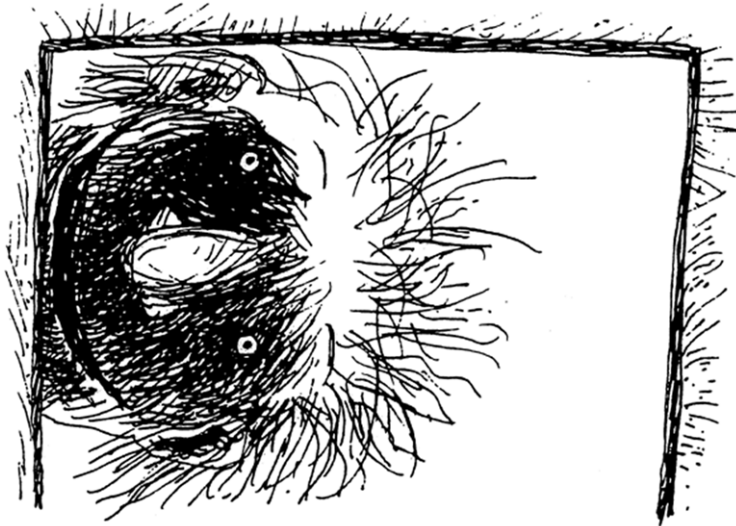


They also bought a pram, a beautiful pram with white clouds on it. They put Birdie inside. She looked like an ordinary baby now, their baby. She stared up at the sky and said: ‘Eep! Eep!’

Tina and Warre were so proud that she could say *Eep*.

No one must find out about the wings. If they did, people would tell each other about it. And then everyone would come and look. They might even think that Birdie was an angel, because they weren’t very well informed about angels. Then they would all come to ask the angel to do something for them. Like never being troubled again by terrible spots or nasty wrinkles or unbelievable headaches. And that would be an awful nuisance.

Sometimes someone would look into the pram. Then a big head would block out the sky.



And sometimes people said: ‘Is that your child?’

Then Warre said: ‘We’ve only got it on loan.’

And then they wanted to know where you could borrow a child, for it would be very convenient to pick one out for yourself and then take it back when you’d had enough of it.

‘It’s really a very long way from here,’ Tina told the people. ‘You have to be in the know about that sort of thing.’

And then she herself took a quick look into the pram.

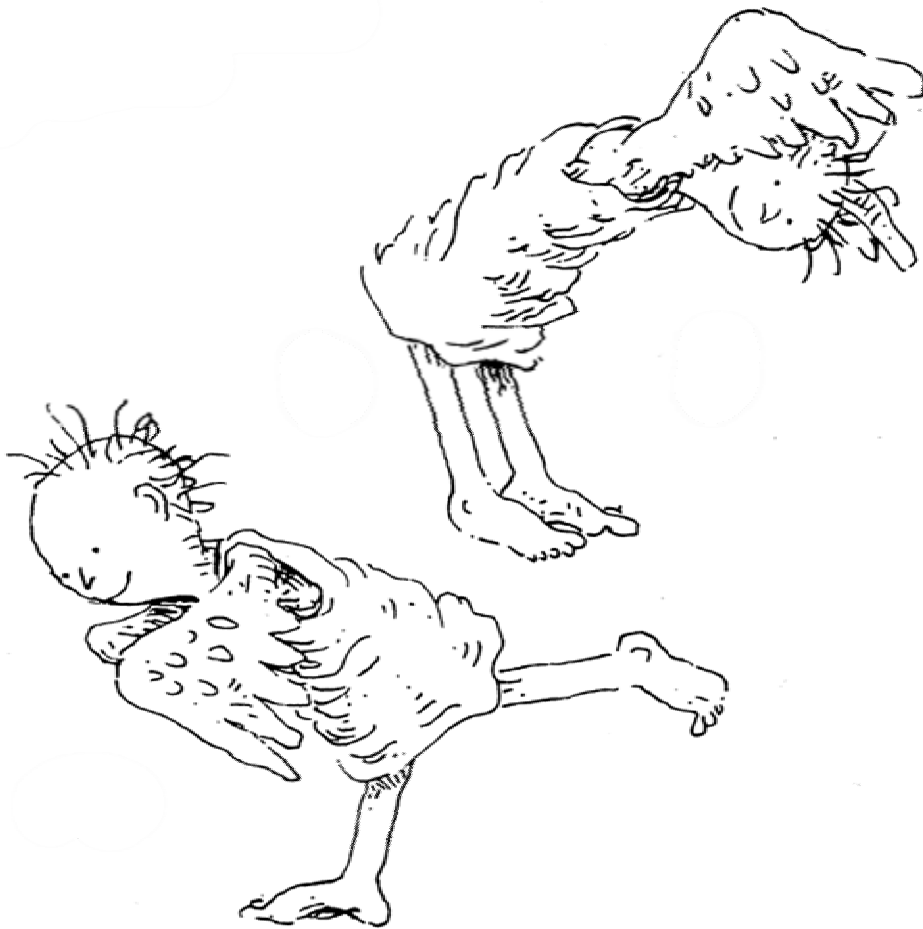
You could see two bumps. But anything could be hidden beneath bumps like those.

And who would have guessed that they were wings anyway?

5

Birdie grew very quickly. It seemed as though things happened to her in one week that would take an ordinary little girl a year. Even so, she stayed smaller and lighter than an ordinary little girl.

She soon started to crawl out of her basket and tried to walk. And it isn't easy, learning how to walk. All young creatures have great difficulty with that.



But Birdie managed it right away. Whenever she was about to fall over, she fluttered her wings for a moment and stayed upright. She didn't seem to mind rocking to and fro a bit.

She soon got better at it, and began to make little jumps at the same time. And these little jumps lasted longer and longer. Soon she could flutter a good metre high, from one wall to the other.

Warre and Tina each sat on a kitchen chair and watched her.

‘Look at that,’ said Tina. ‘It must be handy, being able to flutter about like that. I’d never realised it before. Have you ever thought: if only I could flutter about?’

‘No,’ said Warre. ‘Never. I’ve never thought I might be missing something. Still, it must be really enjoyable, fluttering about like that, feeling so light. I suppose it *is* a pity that we can’t do it.’

‘I can flutter about on the inside,’ said Tina, ‘but we can’t do it on the outside.’

But they tried to do it, even so, because you never could tell. They climbed on to their chairs, flapped their arms vigorously and landed on the floor with a thud.

They sat down again.

Sitting is easy to do.

‘Do you know something, Warre?’ Tina said suddenly. ‘Do you know what I’ve been thinking? She hasn’t any arms. And she hasn’t any hands. She’ll never be able to play the piano, for instance, and that’s something we’d be able to do if we could.’

‘Which do you think would be the most enjoyable thing to do?’ said Warre. ‘Playing the piano or fluttering about?’

‘They’d both be fun,’ said Tina. ‘Especially if you could do them right away without first having to learn how.’

They both thought hard about different things that would be fun to do right away without first having to learn how. About what it would be like to suddenly realise, one fine morning: hey, I can do that. And to call out to each other: ‘Look what I can do all of a sudden!’

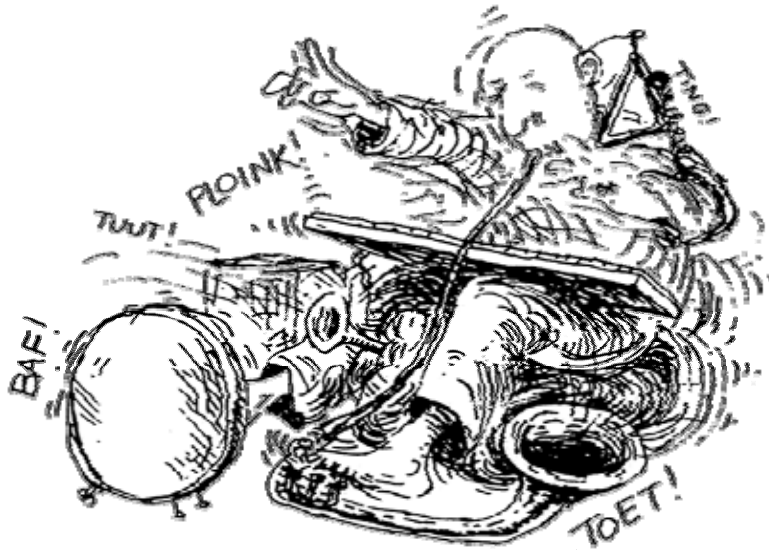


I can speak ten languages at the same time!



I can run for a whole day without getting tired or tripping over!

I can play five instruments all at once!



‘I’m thirsty,’ Warre said suddenly.

‘I’ll make some tea,’ said Tina and went into the kitchen.

Birdie came and stood by the kitchen chairs. She looked at Warre. Her little head was growing red all over. She flapped her wings vigorously.

And out came a word that they’d never heard before. ‘Peepee!’