

Sample Translation

Caesar and the Shell-Singer

(Keizer en de schelpenzanger)

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A donkey with no tail

Caesar hears a quiet singing. He stops and puts one hand to his ear. The singing's coming closer, but it's still too far away for him to hear it properly. The words of the song are blowing away on the wind.

Caesar climbs up the dune and looks in the direction that the singing's coming from. There's no one to be seen. The beach is empty. As though the song has sung itself free of the singer and is floating away through the air.

Maybe it's the wind itself singing its song, thinks Caesar. Or perhaps the sea.

The wind and the sea and the beach all started once with a song. His dad told him so, a while ago, when Caesar asked him if he believed that God had created the world.

'What's in the Bible is one story,' said Caesar's dad. 'But it's certainly not the only one. For instance, there's a story that says the world was sung to life. Long ago, in the Dreamtime, a time far before our own.'

Caesar would like to have been there when it happened. He would have started to sing the song of the sea and the beach and the dunes right away. And he would have sung the world to life, with all of the trees in it and the youth hostel and the White House of the Black Widow and, of course, the house where he lives as well, together with his dad. He realises that the world he sang would be an awful lot like the world he lives in now. Although...

Caesar thinks about his mum. His mum's dead – she drowned, years ago. Caesar was still just a baby. He wasn't even one year old. He doesn't have any real memories of her, but she's still alive for him. That's because of his dad. He keeps her alive, in his stories.

'I'm not much of a singer, Caesar. I prefer to tell stories. Your mum, she could sing beautifully. Long before you were here, she was already dreaming and singing about you, and she kept on dreaming and singing right until you arrived.'

'What did she sing then?' Caesar wanted to know, and so his dad began to sing:

*Your time begins in the spring,
your eyes are brown or blue.
In spring, when all the birdies sing
an ocean of time for you.
Out, sprout, come on out,
and don't you take too long.
Spring dance, take your chance
to sing your own sweet song.*

'Lovely,' said Caesar.

'Your mum sang it so many times more beautifully than I.'

The quiet singing that Caesar had climbed up the dune to hear suddenly seems a lot closer. He still can't see who's singing, but he can hear what's being sung now:

*Ride up the hill and down the dale
on a donkey, on a donkey,
Ride up the hill and down the dale
on a donkey with no tail.*

As the song starts again, the singer finally comes into view. Not up a hill, not down a dale, and not on a donkey, but normally, on foot over the beach. A normal man in jeans and a jumper, not looking up and not looking around, and leaving his footprints in the sand in time with his song. In his hand is a stick decorated with shells.

Caesar keeps watching the singing man until he has marched out of his field of vision. Slowly the song fades to become a quiet singing again. Caesar wonders

where the singing man is heading. He would like to follow him a little way from a safe distance, but he has to go to school. He's already on the late side.

He goes down the dune and once he's reached the bottom he starts running. When he reaches the little path in front of his house where his bike is standing, he suddenly stops. He's caught himself humming the song of the man from the beach and realises that he's been doing it for a while now. It's in his head and it has to come out.

'Ride up the hill and down the dale,' he sings. 'On a donkey with no tail.'

Late

Caesar is sitting on his own in the classroom. All of the other children have already gone home. He has to stay behind.

‘You can write down nice and neatly why you were late to school this morning,’ the teacher had said when the bell went and Caesar stood up with the rest of the class to go home. ‘I’ll be back in half an hour to see how far you’ve got.’

Caesar looks around. He chews on his fountain pen. In front of him is a blank sheet of paper. He hasn’t written anything down yet. And it’s not even that difficult. He can just write that he popped to the beach this morning and that he saw a man singing a song about a donkey with no tail, and that he stayed there listening to the man a little too long and that’s why he was late to school. That’s not so difficult and, what’s more, it’s the truth. But there’s something preventing Caesar from writing it down. As though he wants to keep the man with the song to himself.

Caesar’s been thinking about him all morning.

He’s often heard people just singing out loud in the open air for the sake of it. Just recently, there was a woman on a bike; it was absolutely pouring down. The woman was singing as though it were the first beautiful day of spring. But for one reason or another the man on the beach this morning was different. He looked like a clockwork toy that had been wound up with a key in his back and was now rattling away over the beach. It wouldn’t surprise Caesar at all if the man were still marching, in time with his donkey song. Caesar can remember precisely how the song goes. He wrote it down this morning on a loose piece of paper. It’s folded up in his trouser pocket.

He takes it out, unfolds it and starts singing, quietly at first, but before long he’s singing a lot more loudly. He’s all alone in the classroom, after all, and his voice sounds really good now that the room’s empty. Caesar stands up and starts marching, just like he saw the man doing this morning on the beach, without

looking up or looking around. He's completely absorbed by the song and so he doesn't realise that his teacher's come back into the room. He only notices when she starts applauding.

Caesar immediately stops singing and sits down again in his place. The teacher comes and stands in front of his chair and bends forward. Caesar can smell her perfume. What a whiff! He pushes his chair back a little way.

'What a lovely song,' says the teacher.

'It's a made-up one,' says Caesar.

'Is it now?'

'By my mum,' he quickly adds. He doesn't want to tell his teacher about the man on the beach.

'My dad suddenly started singing it this morning, at breakfast. I thought it was really nice. "It's one of your mum's songs," he said and that made it even better. "Can you teach it to me?" I asked him and we started practising, my dad and I, and that's why I forgot what time it was and so I was late for school...'

'Why didn't you say so straightaway?' says the teacher.

'I don't really know,' says Caesar.

'You funny boy,' she says. She takes the blank piece of paper from his desk and crumples it up.

'Off home, you,' she says.

Caesar stands up and puts his chair upside down on his desk. 'See you tomorrow, miss,' he says as he leaves the room.

'And you will be on time, won't you?'

'Yes, miss.'

He swipes his coat from the hook and goes down the quiet, empty corridor to the exit. The song would sound really good here...

Rock-a-bye boddler

Caesar is sitting with Martha on his lap. He has to keep her amused for a little while. Her mum's just popped out to the shops. Martha's kicking out wildly with her little legs. He has to hold on to her tightly.

'You're strong, you are, you know,' says Caesar. 'Have you been eating spinach or something?'

Martha pushes her legs into Caesar's tummy and leans right back.

'Ow! You're hurting me!' he says. She really is strong! Certainly for a baby. But then you can't call Martha a proper baby any more, but she's still a bit too small to be a toddler. She's somewhere in between.

'Do you know what you are, Martha?' says Caesar. 'A boddler, that's what. A sweet little boddler. What's that? You've never heard of boddlers? That may well be, because I just invented the word myself. Clever, eh?'

Martha laughs. Martha's always laughing. She's like her mum. She's always happy when Caesar comes round, right from the first time he came to visit, when he didn't even know Martha. She had only just been born. Someone had put a wooden stork in the garden in front of the house, so Caesar knew a baby had been born there. Caesar had imagined that it was a baby boy and that it was called Hugo. One day he rang the bell and was told that it was a girl, Martha. And since then he's visited regularly.

'Shall I sing a song for you? It's a really funny song. I only just heard it – from a man on the beach.'

Caesar is just about to start singing when the door opens. It's Martha's mum, back from the shops.

'Was everything all right?' she asks.

'I've made up a new word,' says Caesar. 'Shall I tell you what it is?'

'Let's hear it then.'

'Boddler!' says Caesar.

'Boddler? What does that mean?'

‘Guess!’

‘Boddler,’ says Martha’s mum. ‘It sounds like a German butler: giff your jecket to ze boddler and he vill heng it up for you.’

‘Wrong!’ says Caesar.

‘Boddler...’ repeats Martha’s mum deliberately. ‘Boddler...’

‘It’s to do with Martha.’

‘I really don’t know, Caesar. I give up.’

‘A boddler,’ explains Caesar, ‘is a cross between a baby and a toddler.’

‘That’s a good one.’

‘I just made it up.’

‘*Rock-a-bye boddler, in the tree top,*’ sings Martha’s mum.

‘I know a song too,’ says Caesar and he starts singing the song of the man on the beach. To his surprise Martha’s mum starts singing along with him!

‘Have you seen him too?’ asks Caesar.

It’s out before he realises. Stupid, eh? He wanted to keep the singing man a secret.

‘Have I seen who too?’ asks Martha’s mum.

Caesar can’t go back now.

‘The man on the beach, the man with the song,’ he says.

Fortunately, Martha’s mum doesn’t take him up on it. She tells him about when she was a little girl.

‘My dad always used to sing that song,’ she says. ‘I’d sit on his lap and he’d give me a horsie-ride. I thought it was marvellous. “Again, again,” I always used to say when he stopped singing and then he’d think for a moment and sing it again with different words.’

‘So what did he sing then?’

‘Well, something like this, for example,’ says Martha’s mum.

*Ride on and on and show no fear
on a donkey, on a donkey,*

*Ride on and on and show no fear
on a donkey with one ear.*

‘Great!’ says Caesar. ‘I’m going to sing that for Martha.’

He takes hold of Martha tightly beneath her little arms, perches her on his knees and starts singing. Martha thinks it’s marvellous. Whenever he finishes the song, she starts kicking wildly and then Caesar sings it again from the beginning. It doesn’t seem as though Martha will ever grow tired of it, but Caesar does. He gets cramp in his thighs. He has to stop whether Martha wants him to or not.

Her mum takes her from him. ‘I’m going to pop you to bed,’ she says. ‘It’s time for your afternoon nap.’

‘And I’m off home,’ says Caesar.

‘Shall we wave bye-bye to Caesar, Martha?’

She goes with him into the hall.

‘Bye, Martha,’ says Caesar.

Martha’s mum takes hold of Martha’s right hand and waves with it.

‘Bye, Caesar,’ she says for Martha. ‘See you next time. Will you sing the song about the donkey again?’

‘I will!’ says Caesar.

He wants to dash off, but Martha’s mum has something to ask him.

‘That man on the beach,’ she asks, ‘the one you were just talking about, the one with the song, who is he?’

Caesar hesitates.

‘Oh, just some man,’ he says and leaves it at that.

He’ll keep the singing man on the beach to himself for the time being.

Chatterbox, goldilocks

Caesar's standing at the top of the wooden steps down to the beach. He's holding on to the rail with one hand and trying to get his breath back. He's run all the way from home to here. Just like that, because he felt like it.

Beneath him lies the sea, a vast expanse of grey, with suddenly a man emerging from the waves. As though he's swum from the other side of the sea. It's the singing man! His white tummy looks like a fish's belly.

Could he have been swimming underwater all that time? wonders Caesar. Then he must have seen my mum.

Caesar's mum swims around beneath the waves as a mermaid. At least, that's what his dad has told him. Caesar knows that it's just a story, but it's too lovely a story not to believe in it now and then. Then at least he knows where his mum is. In reality, he doesn't know. In reality, his mum has disappeared without a trace. She probably drowned, but they don't know for sure. Her body has never been found.

The man takes big steps through the surf and runs to a pile of clothes on the beach. Caesar can't hear whether the man is singing now. Surely not. It's freezing cold. Who goes swimming in the sea at this time of year? All of the winter chill is still in the water.

The man dries himself off and gets dressed. Caesar watches him the whole time. Suddenly the man sees him too. He waves. Without thinking about it, Caesar waves back.

That wasn't such a good move, he thinks. He'll be coming over this way in a minute. I'd better get out of here. Who knows what that stranger might want from me.

But the man doesn't want anything from Caesar. Well, he doesn't go over to him anyway. The man goes to a sort of little house, a hut made of planks that has

been built against the dunes, with a curtain for a door. The man pushes the curtain to one side and goes into the hut.

Does the man live there? wonders Caesar, as he slowly goes down to the beach, step by step. He stops at the bottom of the steps. He doesn't really dare go towards the hut. Suppose the man were suddenly to come out and grab him and pull him inside... If only he weren't quite so curious, he'd ignore the hut and the man and go the other way, as he'd been planning to do before he'd seen the singing man leaping out of the waves like a fish.

But who is the man and why does he live in a hut on the beach?

Caesar's curiosity gets the better of his fear. He makes sure that he stays at a safe distance. If the man should suddenly appear from behind the curtain to kidnap him or something, then Caesar's got enough of a head start to escape.

He stops level with the hut. The man behind the curtain is singing the song again! The one about the donkey!

Quietly, Caesar joins in. He's invented new words for it at home:

*Riding quickly, don't be late
on a donkey, on a donkey,
Riding quickly, don't be late
on a donkey through the gate.*

From one moment to the next, the man stops singing. Caesar still carries on, but far from quietly – now he's just singing out loud.

The man puts his head around the curtain.

'That's great!' he shouts.

Caesar immediately stops singing and looks at the man, who has come outside. He's about to have a shave. He's holding a bowl of water, with a cut-throat razor in it and he's just lathered up his chin and his cheeks. He looks funny, with that foam beard, Caesar thinks. And definitely not dangerous.

'Do you live here?' asks Caesar.

The man gestures that he can't hear what Caesar's saying. Caesar goes towards him. He stops about five metres away, so that he can still run away if he needs to.

'Sing what you were just singing again,' says the man.

Caesar hesitates.

'Does an audience make you nervous? Then I'll pop back inside for a moment.' The man disappears behind the curtain.

'OK, you can begin,' he says.

Caesar starts singing and when he's finished and the man doesn't come out straightaway, he sings the song again, with different words:

*Ride along and don't you stop
on a donkey, on a donkey,
Ride along and don't you stop
On a one-legged donkey, hop, hop, hop!*

The man reappears, laughing.

'Brilliant!' he shouts. 'I can just imagine it, a donkey with one leg! Fantastic! Do you mind if I carry on shaving?'

'Do you live here?' Caesar repeats his initial question.

'I live everywhere and nowhere,' says the man. 'Wherever the wind blows me. What about you? Where do you live?'

'Nearby,' says Caesar; he doesn't say where. He still doesn't know whether he can trust the man.

'That's a lovely house you've got,' he says then.

'A gift from the sea,' says the man. He takes hold of the razor, taps it against the edge of the bowl and places it against his skin, underneath his chin. With one skilful movement he makes a track over his lathered face, like a street swept clean in a snowy landscape. Caesar stands there watching him. He doesn't really know what else to say.

‘I have to go now,’ he says finally.

‘Already?’ says the man. ‘Don’t you even want to know my name?’

‘What’s your name then?’

‘You tell me.’

‘Me? My name’s Caesar.’

‘No, I mean: you tell me what my name is.’

‘How should I know?’

‘My name is whatever you call me – just make something up.’

‘I’m not very good at making up names,’ says Caesar. ‘I always get it wrong. Once I named a baby Hugo. But it was a girl.’

This makes the man laugh so much that he cuts himself shaving.

‘Sorry,’ says Caesar.

That makes the man laugh even more.

‘You don’t have to say sorry about that – it was my hand that made a cut in my chin. It’s nothing, just a little cut; a bit of seawater on it and it’ll close up by itself.’

‘That’s good,’ says Caesar.

‘So, any ideas? Have you come up with a name for me?’

‘Not yet,’ says Caesar.

‘That’s a shame,’ says the man, who’s finished shaving now. Apart from that one nick, he hasn’t cut himself at all. And all without a mirror. Caesar thinks that’s pretty good. His dad shaves with a cut-throat razor as well, but he can’t do it without a mirror. He tried it once, on holiday in the tent. What a mess.

The man wipes his face dry, throws away the shaving water and repeats:

‘That’s a shame.’

‘But you have already got a name, haven’t you?’ says Caesar. ‘Everyone’s got a name.’

‘Chatterbox, goldilocks, names just put you in a box,’ sings the man.

‘That’s a good one,’ says Caesar. ‘How does it go on?’

*Chatterbox, goldilocks,
Names just put you in a box.
Chatterbox, goldilocks,
Droopy drawers and smelly socks!*

‘Names are usually a pile of nonsense – and far too often they’re just a label,’ says the man. ‘Thou art Jan and Jan thou shalt remain!’

‘Are you called Jan?’

‘Jan was just an example. I want you to say what my name is. Whenever I meet someone new, I ask them to do that.’

‘Then you must already have a lot of names.’

‘Yes, and there are lots of me. There are lots of everyone. There are lots of you too. What did you say your name was again?’

‘Caesar.’

‘Caesar, good for you.’

‘I’ll come up with a nice name for you. But I’m going to have to think about it a bit – would that be possible?’

‘Anything’s possible.’

‘Well then, ermm... I’d better get along,’ says Caesar.

‘Right you are, I’ll be getting on as well.’

‘What with?’ Caesar asks.

‘With living,’ says the man. ‘With living.’