

SMOKE

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Sample translated from the Spanish
by Charlotte Coombe

They used to say that the bees were disappearing, but some mornings there are so many that if we go outside the cabin we have to walk with our eyes and mouths closed to stop the bees getting in them. Actually I go out by myself, if I have to, because the last time we both went the boy got seven or eight up his sleeves and down his shirt collar and was stung all over his arms and chest. At first, he screamed really loud, a single cry that sounded more like surprise than pain. Then he burst into tears. His crying fits don't usually last long and he was very impressed when I spat in the dirt and made it into a paste with my fingers then, after pulling out the stingers with my nails, applied it to the stings. The mud draws out the venom, I explained. Ever since then, the boy stays in the cabin with his forehead pressed against the window whenever I need to go out in the swarm of bees to chop wood or unclog the broken pipe to the septic tank. Even though I mend that pipe again and again, it is cracked in so many places that mud always eventually seeps inside and solidifies, causing the toilet to block.

If one of these little emergencies that forces me to leave the cabin coincides with an invasion of bees, I tie up the hems of my trousers and the cuffs of my shirt or sweater with string. I cover my neck with a scarf and wrap another scarf round my head so they don't get tangled up in my hair. At first, I used to wear glasses so they wouldn't hit my eyes, but one would always find its way in behind the glasses, panic and sting me on my eyelid. Although I've got used to the stings, they are extremely painful on the eyelid and the swelling makes it hard to see for a few days afterwards.

But if we can, we stay in the cabin watching the wave that drifts like a murmuration of starlings. Like a plastic bag floating in the wind, it descends, rises, ripples, appears to lose its shape. The boy watches in silence—he does almost everything in silence—and he must be scared because he holds my hand, and sometimes he trembles as if he's shivering and moves slightly closer to me. It is one of the rare moments when he allows me to put an arm round his shoulders. Sometimes we are surrounded for so many hours that we end up leaving our guard post; but we can't forget about them, because the buzzing penetrates the wooden

walls, and I frequently find myself shaking off a non-existent insect whenever I brush against something. My skin itches as if it were covered, even under clothes, by thousands of invisible little feet. When they finally disappear, we open the door and he looks from side to side to make sure they've gone, although if they were nearby, we would still hear their wings beating. On the ground are a few dead ones, and some that are not quite dead yet, stumbling around in a daze or on their backs in the dirt, kicking their legs. The boy doesn't stamp on them to finish them off, but eyes them suspiciously and sometimes when one stops moving, he nudges it with the tip of his foot as if to make sure it is dead.

I haven't managed to work out where they come from. The hives along the forest path are abandoned, inside them only a build-up of dry leaves and dirty cobwebs with twigs and the remains of insects quivering on them. I don't know why they come here either. I never see them sipping nectar from the flowers near the cabin; they aren't interested in the rockrose or lavender or broom bushes; and they even swarm around this area at times when there are hardly any flowers; they just fly around, thronging so thickly in the air that sometimes it is hard to make out the mountains on the other side of the valley.

It must be two or three weeks now since the last swarm engulfed the house. Maybe because it's starting to get colder, or because the wind that has been blowing down from the mountains for days has chased them away. Although I'm really talking about the same thing because the cold always arrives with the wind from the mountains, as if winter could not come from anywhere else. Every year, the arrival of that freezing air makes me angry but despondent. It paralyses me for hours inside the cabin. It pushes me to imagine an escape, or a miracle—that's a lie, I can't even imagine that—that will solve all my problems. With the arrival of winter, our life becomes even more precarious, even more uncertain. The ice again. The snow again. Above all, the hunger again. Do the few animals that live in this forest have the same fears?

I haven't set foot in a city for five or six years, and I've got used to hearing nothing but the sounds of nature. There are no machines around here, and the car parked a hundred yards from the front door had already had its engine stolen by the time I came. Although to use the word 'stolen', one would have to assume the existence of an owner. Of course, the wheels are missing, and I presume the electrical circuits are too. One of the first things I did was to check if it had any petrol left in it, but the tube I inserted into the fuel tank only gave me a mouthful of petrol fumes; I can still remember the pungent taste. There is also the out-of-use sawmill, gradually crumbling in the middle of the eucalyptus forest, where lilacs, broom, blackberries, and wild roses now grow among the timber. Even the planes that occasionally cut across the sky trace their white lines on the blue in silence: the nearest airport is several hundred miles away, and the planes fly at high altitude. So, mostly I only hear rustling, buzzing, whistling, the leaves brushing against each other on the branches, the call or whine of an animal, the rain on the roof tiles and corrugated iron, the wind rattling the shutters (which I removed for that very reason, plus they were so broken that they offered no protection from the cold).

The boy isn't noisy either. It's not that he doesn't talk, it's just that he can go for days without saying a word. Sometimes he answers and sometimes he doesn't. Sometimes it's he who, on his own initiative, says something. He points and says: hazelnuts. He points at the dry creek and says "arroyo", drawing out the word and accentuating the "erre", as if he enjoys making that sound. He says rain. He says thistle. He says fire. He says yesterday, and then I don't know what he's referring to. If I ask him where he comes from, he thinks for a moment then says: time. I don't know his name. Maybe he doesn't even know it. On one of the first days, sitting across the kitchen table from one another, I placed my index finger on my chest and said: Andrea. My name isn't Andrea, but it's a name I like, and it doesn't matter what my real name is. It is one of the few things I am able to choose. Andrea, I repeated, pointing at myself. Then I pointed at him. He craned his neck to look at my finger resting against his sternum. Me Andrea, I said, tapping myself again. You? He frowned, looking at my finger as if waiting to see what came next, as if that gesture were the start of some interesting development. At last he said, Goodbye, which is what he always says when he's overwhelmed by a situation. Since then, whenever I'm in a good mood, I call him Goodbye. To say that he smiles at this would be an exaggeration, but I do get the impression that his features relax a little, as if he's thinking about smiling.

In the morning, when his face is relaxed, just after he's woken up and opened his eyes, you'd think he was six years old. By the afternoon he has aged, or rather he has become worn out, and his features seem to blur, to fade away. Then he looks like a boy of ten or twelve who has just run away from the orphanage where he was being abused. I like it in the morning, it makes me happy to watch, out of the corner of my eye, the way he explores the tiny world we live in, are trapped in. By the evening I feel tenderness or compassion towards him, or a mixture of both; I would like to cradle that little bird recently fallen from its nest, that cat returning home after surviving a dip in the icy river, that dog, who despite everything, fearfully sidles up to the person who just struck it. I live with a little animal that is completely undomesticated, a being that is incapable of surviving on its own, but does not beg, or give up. If he were my son, I'd be proud of him.

I gaze at a smouldering sunset. The clouds that for most of the day have clung to the mountainside have risen and now hover over the peaks, their pink bellies tinting the snow with their reflection. The sun has already set for us, but the light is brighter than it was a few hours ago. The last leaves of the poplars and oaks glow reddish and yellowish. I look down and see that the cat is staring in the same direction. Do animals have a sense of beauty? Do they feel emotion at the sight of the sea crashing against the base of a cliff, a forest invaded by mist, a sky that seems to be about to dissolve into a blanket of burning embers? Next to us, the boy traces figures in the dust: he never draws animals or people, trees or houses, clouds or suns. His doodles seem to reflect a world of single-celled beings: ovals surrounded by flagella, tapered shapes with antennae protruding from them, figures that could be corals or amoebae. He does one drawing on top of another without erasing the old one, as if they absorb each other. Meanwhile, the sky has turned from pink to burning red, the edges of the clouds are incandescent blades,

but the bottom of the valley is vanishing, as if submerged in murky water. The boy has stood up. He closes his eyes for a few seconds then opens them for a similar length of time, repeats the action again and again, and I wonder if he's checking that when he opens his eyes, the spectacle is still there. Perhaps he thinks that the world only exists when he sees it.

Do you like it? I ask him. He does what I believe to be a nod, and sometimes I think that our communication goes beyond the immediate, that in fact we are talking about something much broader and more meaningful than my words could convey. I've written "we are talking", as if he actually responds using any kind of rudimentary sentence.

Then he carries on drawing his geometric world, a world in which I have no idea what he is portraying or revealing. Perhaps nothing. There might be no relationship at all between those lines and what surrounds him. Nor does he appear to be attached to any of his works; he doesn't look at them when he finishes—if he has indeed finished anything—but treads over them carelessly and doesn't care if Miss Daisy or I do the same. Neither the cat nor the boy can explain to me why they do what they do; they do not give reasons. They are a pair of black boxes, impossible to open. I don't give them many explanations either. We co-exist, in silence most of the time. We do what we have to do; without justifying ourselves. Without lying. I can't imagine a better family.

Miss Daisy comes in and goes straight over to the boy. She flops down next to him. Sometimes he strokes her absent-mindedly. Other times, he plays games with her that are full of sound effects and gestures I can't decipher. When he does this, I can only watch them out of the corner of my eye, because if he realises that I'm paying attention to them, he stops what he's doing and turns his head back towards the wall. I don't want to deprive him of this relief, his escape to an imaginary place where he can get away from this cabin. So, I listen to their games, the boy's voice becoming catlike, the occasional unthreatening huff, their slight movements—I am not sure which of the two is more catlike, the animal or the child—and in precious moments, something similar to laughter. Just then, listening to the cat and the boy, feeling their movements on the wooden floor, I have a sense of home. That's why I don't let them out of my sight or go off and do something else. I pretend to be doing some essential task close by: I clean the stove, sweeping away the ashes, but also the bees that sometimes come down the chimney and perish before they manage to make their way back outside, even when the fire is unlit; I cook, if there is anything to cook (more before than now) on the same stove, which has a metal plate on top that serves as a hob; or I unblock, yet again, the kitchen sink that also serves as a washing machine, a washbasin and a bath tub (here everything performs several functions at once, but none of them very well). I only use it as a basin wash myself—the trickle of water from the tap is not enough for me to wash myself directly with it—but sometimes the boy will clamber up and sit on the chipped tiles surrounding it, dip his feet in and splash around. He tries to sit in it, but not even he is small enough to do that. Despite his many inhibitions, he isn't embarrassed about being naked in my presence. Sometimes he fiddles absent-mindedly with his tiny penis, tugs at it or

massages it, or scratches it when we've gone a long time without water, and he hasn't been able to wash for days. I've never managed to persuade him to come down to the river with me, or rather, he will go down there, but he refuses to bathe. I know nothing about him before the day he strolled into the cabin as naturally as someone entering their house, sat down on a chair, and started playing with Miss Daisy—who was the first to adopt him—, so I also don't know if he's had any bad experiences with white water. Or perhaps he's never seen a river before and is afraid of how fast the water rushes along, carrying leaves, small logs and dead fish with it; or of the eddies on the other bank, the foam as the current hits the rocks, the noise of the pebbles tumbling downstream. I've taken him to a backwater among the birch roots where the water is still, and it's shallow enough to stand. But I've never managed to get him to even come near it. I bathe myself, without taking off my underwear. Although I find it strange, I feel embarrassed. I suppose it's because he stares for minutes on end at anything that interests him, almost without blinking, and I would feel uncomfortable being looked at like that, even by a child.

When they get bored of playing, they come to me, both of them, and watch me with that shared capacity for staring, and I give the boy and Miss Daisy something to eat, if I have anything.

If food is scarce, the cat follows me around, watches my every move, rears up on her hind legs when I pass by, meows, rubs against my legs, trips me up. Go and hunt, I say to her, and bring us back something. You're the feline. The boy doesn't protest when I don't feed him. He doesn't follow me about or whine. Nor does his mood seem to change at all. He accepts hunger as he accepts the cold or the heat, the bees or the wind. He doesn't seem to be aware of what is the result of a human act, or what is imposed on us by nature. Perhaps he is right, and there is no difference. Whether we are hurt deliberately, or by a random occurrence, it doesn't alter the extent of the pain. In any case, he probably understands that if we skip a meal, it isn't because I'm withholding it from him, but because everything in the vegetable patch is rotting, as if the soil has become poisonous, and the trees around us are also bearing less fruit. All we're left with is berries, hazelnuts—which this year have almost all gone mouldy in their shells—, and walnuts that are mostly empty. Also mushrooms and acorns. And very occasionally some meat, not when I hunt, which I've rarely done, not only because I'm a bad aim but also because I prefer to keep the cartridges for when the need is extreme, and I'm not talking about hunger. If we eat meat, it's because a feral dog has come here to eat its prey, drawn to the warmth seeping out from under the door, or trying to evade the loneliness by being near other living creatures, and I manage to snatch it away. Luckily, I've never been afraid of dogs. I have a metal pitchfork with blunt tips, which must have been used for stacking hay, and as soon as their guard is down, I use the pitchfork to pin the animal to the ground by the neck. It's just the right size so that, unless the dog is very small, they cannot pull their head out once I've caught them. They resist, of course they resist, they kick and growl and flip over to try and break free, their eyes roll back in their heads, as if seeking the source of the attack. They end up releasing their prey, some of them out of desperation, but the most aggressive ones, so that their jaws are free to snap

and bite in every direction. Then I crouch down, clasp the handle of the pitchfork tightly in case they escape at the last moment, and especially in case they strain their neck far enough out to bite me. I pick up the piece of meat which, if I'm lucky, they've barely chewed yet. Then I go back into the cabin still holding the animal down with the pitchfork and, from the threshold, let go of it just before I close the door. Generally, it doesn't do them much harm. The ones that thrash around and struggle the most end up with some hangman's grazes on their necks, a few minor cuts, nothing serious. One mastiff, which fought so hard and furiously that it nearly knocked me down, then started throwing itself against the closed door; through the window I could see how it bit the doorknob, growled and drooled, shoved the door with one of its front paws. It eventually grew tired but hung around the house for a while and eyed me from a distance when I went down to the vegetable patch, armed with the shotgun and on edge, because I wouldn't have been surprised if the dog had attacked me. Although even wild dogs seem to know a shotgun when they see one.

I have to say that eating the meat I take from the dogs doesn't disgust me. It is usually a bird, half-plucked by the animal's teeth, and I remove the final feathers, cut off the head, which has usually been crunched, and throw the bird into the frying pan, if necessary, removing the areas where there are shards of bone. No, I'm not ashamed or repulsed. I'm actually rather proud of my survival skills.

There was one time when I refrained from eating prey I'd taken from a young Labrador, which I also inadvertently stabbed in the neck with the pitchfork, and which had run off into the junipers yelping. I felt sick to my stomach at having wounded the animal, almost nailing it to the ground despite the bluntness of the pitchfork's spikes; I felt terrible when I heard the dog's yelp, saw its reproachful look, its fear. But that isn't why I didn't cook the rabbit. When I took it inside the cabin—the dog's whimpering could still be heard in the distance—its eyes looked gloopy, sealed shut. The dried blood that appeared to have trickled out of its nose before it was hunted was also not very reassuring. I'm almost certain that myxomatosis cannot be transmitted to humans, so it was not so much the fear of infection, as a refusal to eat the meat of an infected animal (you could almost call it a superstition, or at least an irrational feeling) that made me give up on the rabbit. The boy had come over because he thought I was going to skin it, and he is fascinated whenever I pluck, cut flesh and bones, separate cartilage. He had never seen me skin a rabbit before, but he probably thought he was about to witness an amazing operation.

It's sick, I said, although that statement could only have been applied to a living thing. The eyes, look, they're all swollen and sticky.

The boy reached out and stroked its eyelids. We can't eat it. Let go, I said too, because he'd grabbed one of its legs. No, it's not for eating.

It is rare for the boy to be so taken with something, but no matter how hard I pulled, I couldn't make him let go of the rabbit's gnawed leg.

Let go of it, and I shoved him firmly away, because he had just taken his knife out of his pocket. I went outside, crossed the scrubland that separated us from the forest, with the boy practically running after me, and hurled the dead rabbit as far as I could into the trees. If I said the boy didn't speak to me for three days it

wouldn't be very significant, because it's normal for him not to speak to me. But he refused even to look at me or acknowledge my presence.

Don't be silly, it could have made us sick. But I guess the need for food was more powerful for him than taking any precautions. The next time I get a rabbit, if there is a next time, even if it has myxomatosis or any other disease, I'll teach the boy to skin it, we'll dismember it together, we'll eat it with our hands, with our teeth, just as the dog I stole it from would have done. The boy has accepted, before I have, that we can no longer be governed by the considerations of civilised humans. To stay alive, we must return to an animalistic state that I would have once found despicable. But perhaps the boy never left it in the first place. I don't condemn him for that. In fact, I think it's a useful asset for a potential ally to have.