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From: **Buck Song**, a novel (1994)

Translation: Susan Ridder

Yolan sits opposite her boyfriend Jo, who hasn't spoken for more than a month. Is he a man, an animal or a sculpture? In an attempt to bring him to life, Yolan tells him their common history. At eighteen, she travelled from the Netherlands to France to be with him. He lived there among a flock of animals she consistently calls 'nannies' or 'women'. It was a world totally alien to her.

'In winter,' *she says to Jo*, 'I had to wear these rubber boots from the rubbish tip, which you repaired with glue and two bits of tube. Every day I wore the same trousers, and with every step one boot would touch the inside of the other trouser leg, leaving even more mud on it. Once the boots got so stuck in the muck that they just stopped going and I fell over. My clothes had always been the most important means of expressing myself, but now they only protected me against the cold. Everything I put on grew dirty and shabby - if I didn't watch out, I'd soon become shapeless myself. Nowhere in nature could I find any sharp dividing lines, any even surfaces. Under my feet, sand gradually turned to grass, the walls rising from it were covered in moss, their upper edges softened over the years. Even inside, in our kitchen, the doors tended to tilt, the beams developed ever larger cracks.

I began to look for another way to express my feelings, the diary I'd started to write no longer sufficed. If I'd had paint, brushes and a canvas, I might have taken up painting, but I didn't manage to get good materials. I didn't have the money to buy them, and I would've had to hitch-hike to the local town. It was the only one in the area and had just five thousand inhabitants, probably none of whom painted. I therefore turned to the riches of the rubbish tip. The only disadvantage of that, though, was that I never knew whether I'd find anything useful. If I was tempted by something, I couldn't be sure I'd find it again the next day.

And so I began to collect droppings from the shed. My supply was like a nut tree I could shake all year round, a glass of water I could always drink from, because every day there was a new load for me to collect. I'm repulsed by the thought of doing this with any other animal's droppings, unless they were ruminants too, but to me these were the forms which most seemed to have been produced by humans in this place.

‘What are you going to do with it?’ you asked, a little suspicious. That I couldn’t answer so easily. If I’d told you I was going to grind them down and eat them, you’d probably have been satisfied. I simply needed to work with something, create something through which I could deal with the natural processes that confronted me every day. Otherwise, the atmosphere I’d landed in would overwhelm me.

We never fought, and I think we thought we never would, but at the very moment I was going to experiment and cook a handful of droppings, you suddenly stood up from your chair and said what I was doing was ridiculous. What was the use of a pot of cooked crap? You angrily snatched the handle from my hands, opened the window and hurled it out, contents and all. I’d better start cooking properly, you shouted furiously, instead of leaving it to you every day. Cooking food was a lot more useful than cooking shit. Or perhaps I could create a vegetable garden, I could put a lot of my excess energy into it, and it would be useful, as the vegetables from the shop in the village were far too expensive.

‘But I know nothing about that!’ I cried indignantly. ‘And I don’t want to either.’ I’d already decided that I shouldn’t continue the way I was, that cooked droppings weren’t interesting and that I wanted to preserve form rather than lose it, but creating a garden attracted me even less. ‘Let other people who know more about these things grow my food. If I had enough money, I wouldn’t care how much I’d have to pay for it.’

‘How decadent,’ was your scornful reply.

‘It’s all your mother’s fault!’ I blurted out, leaving the kitchen to find the pan. During our daily excursions with the women you slowly painted me a picture of your childhood. It was a story full of blue jackets, Sunday walks, ‘What will the neighbours say?’ and always that urge to break loose, to flee, to give in to your true nature. Now and again there were hints of a secret scooter ride, a drum kit of plastic containers and pots, a pan full of potato pyramids. But with great self-control and a deep sense of responsibility you usually managed to suppress such urges. You even decided not to undergo your puberty. At home, that is, in the flat. At school it came out with a vengeance.

I found the pan and retrieved the wet muck from the grass. I did my best to slide most of the pulp back into the pan. As I walked back to the kitchen with the remains I’d rescued, you stood with your hands on your hips by the open window. ‘I refuse to please anyone,’ I snapped at you, ‘I only want to experiment - as much as I can, I want to investigate. You’re always trying to please, always caring, looking after, arranging things, being a busy-body.

That's how you were raised, it was drilled into you. Even now you're nine hundred kilometres away from her, you can't escape.'

'I've nothing to do with my mother!' you shouted, furious, 'and anyway, you're the one who's always complaining that my clothes aren't clean. She did exactly the same!'

'If you've nothing to do with your mother,' I yelled, 'then why do you find it so difficult to ring her, why do you keep putting it off?' I charged back into the kitchen, the saucepan held defiantly in front of me. 'Well, tell me. I've been trying for months to get you to ring her, but you just don't do it. The poor woman must be worried sick.'

That you didn't have an answer to. Head lowered, you went outside. I followed you, shocked by my own words. 'Jo, I'm sorry,' I tried humbly, 'I didn't mean it.' You turned around and mumbled you were sorry too, you didn't mean it either. I should do whatever I thought best.

To celebrate our reconciliation, we went to the rubbish tip. We both felt at home there, the objects it held could be both useful and aesthetic. You were cheered up by a rusty blender with two small wheels that turned the whisk, I fancied an enamelled oval tub.

On the way back we stopped by the village's only phone booth. You dangled the special coin with which I always rang my parents in the slot, but for the first time the trick failed, the thread broke. No matter what we tried, the slot remained blocked. No point trying that again in a hurry.

The next day I was busy collecting droppings in the shed again. The murmuring girls around me nudged me reassuringly, trying to stick their noses into my plastic bag to see what was inside. I loved their massive bodies, the smell of hay and straw, the rattling sound of their dark brown pellets fired from the openings I'd rather not see. They were still warm when I picked them up. I had to hold back from sticking one in my mouth now and again. Only the firmest ones interested me, their density and smell depending on the producer's state of health. If she wasn't quite well, she might produce anything from a string of little balls, to lumps in which the balls were no longer recognisable. If it was a sauce or even a soupy puree, she was seriously ill. (...)

Thirty pages later in the book, Yolán remembers how she continued her attempts to understand and control nature in France.

(...) I went to the grocery,' *she says to Jo, who still remains silent*, 'because I was thinking about making little balls from clay, baking or drying them and then painting them brown, so that they would be indistinguishable from manure. Unfortunately, there wasn't a single type of clay for sale, the only thing I could find was a paper bag of dusty grey-green clumps that swell and fizz when you pour water over them. I was told it was often used as medicine and that I could also put it on my face as a mask. Once at home, I tried it out immediately. The smooth layer hardened into an armour plate, I seemed to turn into someone whose bones are on the outside. I felt like a nut, a tortoise, an oyster. It was difficult to open my eyes, and I could only talk or smile after I'd rinsed the mass off my face with plenty of water.

With endless patience I managed to create real man-made droppings with this loam, ones you could hardly distinguish from the real thing. Some I dented at one side and drew to a point at the other. The only thing that wasn't quite right about them was their weight - they were much heavier. In an hour I made as many as a woman could produce in ten seconds. I would've liked to talk about it with someone who understood what I was doing, preferably an artist. But until I could, I continued to create droppings, which I'd been doing for several days when you came to get me to help out in the shed. Dejected, you told me that you found Jane with a swollen belly, her legs up in the air like sticks.

'Not dead, is she?' I asked, my eyes big with shock.

'Yes, dead. Jane's dead.'

I had to help you load her onto a wheelbarrow, you said, so you could put her outside the gate until the knackers came to take her away. She was too large to bury.

I followed you to the shed. I knew Jane was elderly, but I still averted my eyes when I dragged her by the horns and head, while you lifted the other half of her heavy body. Once on the wheelbarrow, you took her to the street, the miserable gate squeaking for the umpteenth time. I ran back into the large house and washed my hands. Then I went to my room and locked the door. I spent an hour, perhaps, stirring loam in a tray with a stick, listening to its familiar fizzing. I bent over it, inhaling the dusty old smell. It comforted me. As I hung over, I heard you come up the stairs. You tried to push open the door of the studio, but when that didn't work, you knocked politely.

'Yolan... you there?' I heard. Your voice trembled so much that I knew something else had happened.

'What's the matter?'

‘Another one’s died,’ you said softly and, when I quietly let you in, you hardly dared look at me. ‘It’s MarlÈne.’

Saddened, we sat down side by side on the bed. I brought the tray of clay I still held up to my nose. ‘I don’t know anymore,’ I said despondently. ‘I can’t stand it anymore. I don’t understand it, and I don’t want it.’ MarlÈne was a six month old baby. The mating season was near and soon they would be making new dead animals.

I tried to sigh, but my breath caught. ‘If my room wasn’t so high up, you could have brought her in on the wheelbarrow. It really breaks my heart, this, I’ve got to do something about it. I can only deal with something so futile if I turn it into images.’

‘I think I can carry her.’

‘You think so? Could you bring her here then? Perhaps you should cover your arm first.’

‘No, Yolán,’ you replied, and were quiet for a moment. ‘I’m not carrying her in my arms, she’s dead, remember. I’ll carry her by the legs, two in each hand.’

You went downstairs, I put the tray of clay on the desk. Luckily, I had some old plastic sheets, which I spread out on the wooden floor at one end of the studio.

The child was carried in like an animal. Just like Jane, her body was swollen. She could have worms, perhaps her round belly was infested. She certainly wasn’t odourless, although it would be an exaggeration to say she stank. It was more like someone with bad breath had come in.

You laid MarlÈne on her side on the plastic, right under the window at the front of the house, in one of the two turrets. She didn’t look very dead. I thought that perhaps she was asleep, but according to you that was because she was hairy. A dead nanny never looked like an empty shell. The minute she was laid on the plastic, two orange-brown ticks appeared, which you quickly caught and crushed between your nails. Blood spurted out. A little later I saw some other insects crossing the floor. Everything began to itch, my nose, the top of my head, even my legs I needed to scratch.

We looked at the dead animal without speaking. I was nervous. Shaking, I lifted the tray of clay off the desk and took some loam. Then I knelt down and smeared it on the dead beast’s head. You protested, but when I made a peremptory gesture, you let me get on with it. After both half-opened eyes had disappeared under a green layer, I calmed down a bit. Now it almost wasn’t a young woman anymore, but an object. After the eyes, I covered the entire head and the two ears, one of which was red with blood. Next was her neck, then the entire

body disappeared under a layer of clay. A beautiful, almost abstract shape emerged, an object sculpted so true to nature that it seemed to come alive.

‘Go lie down beside her,’ I said curtly. ‘Here, with your head next to hers.’

‘Do you have a special reason for that?’

‘Yes.’

You hesitated.

‘Please, Jo, do it for me.’

You lay down on the plastic, your head well away from the wet form.

‘Don’t be afraid, I’m going to do something to you too.’

Submitting completely, you allowed me to cover your head too in clay, I even applied a thin layer to your eyelids. Your mouth, your ears - of all your orifices, I only left your nostrils uncovered. You lay very still, ‘introverted,’ I thought, and you stayed that way when I pulled up the smaller sculpture and lifted her head, so that I could place her nose carefully on your loam forehead. I then covered your long hair. It became more substantial, so I was able to use it to fill the space between the back of your head and her chest. I would have loved to cover your entire body, even cover your clothes if necessary, but I ran out of clay, there wasn’t enough left in the tray. So I closed my right eye and looking through my fingers at the two-headed object, I was able to pretend that I’d mummified you from head to toe. You could no longer see where the human began and the animal ended. Finally, I had power over life and death, finally there was no difference between that which still breathed, and that which was dead. You couldn’t tell who was in which phase. You could have died, she could have been brought back to life. You were both made of the same base material, you were both between image and organism. How I would have liked to join you, to merge underneath that comforting layer of clay with the man, the animal and death.