

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Detour

Gerbrand Bakker

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About the Book

A Dutch woman rents a remote farm in rural Wales. She says her name is Emilie. She is a lecturer doing some research, and sets about making the farmhouse more homely. When she arrives there are ten geese living in the garden but one by one they disappear. Perhaps it's the work of a local fox.

She has fled from an unbearable situation having recently confessed to an affair with one of her students. In Amsterdam, her stunned husband forms a strange partnership with a detective who agrees to help him trace her. They board the ferry to Hull on Christmas Eve.

Back on the farm, a young man out walking with his dog injures himself and stays the night, then ends up staying longer. Yet something is deeply wrong. Does he know what he is getting himself into? And what will happen when her husband and the policeman arrive?

Gerbrand Bakker has made the territories of isolation, inner turmoil and the solace offered by the natural world his own. *The Detour* is a deeply moving new novel, shot through with longing and the quiet tragedy of everyday lives.

About the Author

Gerbrand Bakker worked as a subtitler for nature films before becoming a gardener. His debut novel *The Twin* won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and will soon be made into a film.

Also by Gerbrand Bakker

The Twin

Gerbrand Bakker
The Detour

TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH

BY

David Colmer



Harvill Secker
LONDON

Ample make this bed.
Make this bed with awe;
In it wait till judgment break
Excellent and fair.

Be its mattress straight,
Be its pillow round;
Let no sunrise' yellow noise
Interrupt this ground.

Emily Dickinson

November

1

EARLY ONE MORNING she saw the badgers. They were near the stone circle she had discovered a few days earlier and wanted to see at dawn. She had always thought of them as peaceful, shy and somehow lumbering animals, but they were fighting and hissing. When they noticed her they ambled off into the flowering gorse. There was a smell of coconut in the air. She walked back along the path you could find only by looking into the distance, a path whose existence she had surmised from rusty kissing gates, rotten stiles and the odd post with a symbol presumably meant to represent a hiker. The grass was untrodden.

November. Windless and damp. She was happy about the badgers, satisfied to know they were at the stone circle whether she went there or not. Beside the grassy path stood ancient trees covered with coarse, light grey lichen, their branches brittle. Brittle yet tenacious, still in leaf. The trees were remarkably green for the time of year. The weather was often grey. The sea was close by; when she looked out from the upstairs windows in the daytime she occasionally spotted it. On other days it was nowhere in sight. Just trees, mainly oaks, sometimes light brown cows looking at her, inquisitive and indifferent at once.

At night she heard water; a stream ran past the house. Now and then she would wake with a start. The wind had turned or picked up and the rushing of the stream no longer carried. She had been there about three weeks. Long enough to wake up because a sound was missing.

2

OF THE TEN fat white geese in the field next to the drive, only seven were left a couple of weeks later. All she found of the other three were feathers and one orange foot. The remaining birds stood by impassively and ate the grass. She couldn't think of any predator other than a fox, but she wouldn't have been surprised to hear that there were wolves or even bears in the area. She felt that she was to blame for the geese being eaten, that she was responsible for their survival.

'Drive' was a flattering word for the winding dirt track, about a kilometre and a half long and patched here and there with a load of crushed brick or broken roof tiles. The land along the drive - meadows, bog, woods - belonged to the house, but she still hadn't worked out just how it slotted together, mainly because it was hilly. The goose field, at least, was fenced neatly with barbed wire. It didn't save them. Once, someone had dug them three ponds, each a little lower than the last and all three fed by the same invisible spring. Once, a wooden hut had stood next to those ponds: now it was little more than a capsized roof with a sagging bench in front of it.

The house faced away from the drive towards the stone circle (out of sight) and, much further, the sea. The countryside fell away very gradually and all of the main windows looked out over it. At the back there were just two small windows, one in the large bedroom and one in the bathroom. The stream was on the kitchen side of the house. In the living room, where she kept the light on almost all

day, there was a large wood-burning stove. The stairs were an open construction against a side wall, directly opposite the front door, the top half of which was a thick pane of glass. Upstairs, two bedrooms and an enormous bathroom with an old claw-foot tub. The former pigsty - which could never have held more than three large pigs at once - was now a shed containing a good supply of firewood and all kinds of abandoned junk. Under it, a large cellar, whose purpose she hadn't quite fathomed. It was tidy and well made, the walls finished with some kind of clay. A horizontal strip window next to the concrete stairs offered a little light. The cellar could be sealed with a trapdoor which, by the look of it, hadn't been lowered for quite some time. She was gradually expanding the area she moved in; the stone circle couldn't have been much more than two kilometres away.

3

THE AREA AROUND the house. She had driven to Bangor once to do the shopping but after that she went to Caernarfon, which was closer. Bangor was tiny but still much too busy for her. They had a university there and that meant students. She had no desire to set eyes on another university student, especially not a first year. Bangor was out. In the even smaller town of Caernarfon, a lot of the shops were closed, with *FOR SALE* daubed on the windows in white paint. She noticed shopkeepers visiting each other to keep their spirits up with coffee and cigarettes. The castle was as desolate as an outdoor swimming pool in January. The Tesco's was large and spacious and open till nine. She still couldn't get used to the narrow, sunken lanes: braking for every bend, panicking about left or right.

She slept in the small bedroom on a mattress on the floor. There was a fireplace, as in the large bedroom, but so far she hadn't used it. She should have really, if only to see if the chimney drew. It was a lot less damp than she'd expected. Her favourite place upstairs was the landing, with its L-shaped wooden balustrade, worn floorboards and window seat. Now and then, at night, sitting on the window seat and looking out into the darkness through the tendrils of an old creeper, she would notice that she wasn't entirely alone: somewhere in the distance there was a light. Anglesey was in that direction too and from Anglesey you could catch a ferry to Ireland. The ferry put out to sea at fixed times and at other fixed times it put into harbour. Once she saw the sea gleaming in the moonlight, the water

pale and smooth. Sometimes she heard honking from the goose field, muffled by the thick walls. She couldn't do anything about it; she couldn't stop a fox in the night.

4

ONE DAY HER uncle had walked into the pond, the pond in the large front garden of the hotel he worked at. The water refused to come up any higher than his hips. Other staff members pulled him out, gave him a pair of dry trousers and sat him on a chair in the warm kitchen (it was mid-November). Clean socks were not available. They put his shoes on an oven. That was about it, or what she knew of it anyway, no one ever went into any more detail. Just that he'd walked into the pond and stood there a while, wet up to his hotel-uniform belt. Surprised, perhaps. He must have judged the water to be deeper.

Her being here had something to do with that uncle. At least, she had begun to suspect as much. Scarcely a day passed without her thinking of him, seeing him before her in the smooth water of the hotel pond. So far gone that he hardly realised that hip-deep water wasn't enough to drown in. Incapable of simply toppling over. All of the pockets of the clothes he was wearing stuffed with the heaviest objects he had been able to find in the hotel kitchen.

She hadn't thought about him for a very long time. Perhaps she did now, in this foreign country, because it was November here too or because she sensed how vulnerable people are when they have no idea what to do next, how to move forward or back. That a shallow hotel pond can feel like a standstill, like marking time with the bank - no start or end, a circle - as the past, present and unlimited future. And because of that, she also thought she understood him just standing there and not trying to get his head

underwater. A standstill. Without any form of physicality: no sex, no eroticism, no sense of expectation. In the few weeks she'd been in the house, with the exception of when she was in the claw-foot bath, she had not once felt any impulse to put a hand between her legs. She inhabited this house the way he'd stood in that pond.

5

SHE HAD SET up the large bedroom as a study. More precisely, she had pushed the worm-eaten oak table that was there when she arrived over to the window and put a desk lamp on it. Next to the lamp she placed an ashtray and next to the ashtray she laid the *Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Before sitting down at the table she usually slid the window up a little. When she smoked, she blew the smoke at the crack. In this room the leaves of the creeper annoyed her, so one day she took the rickety wooden stepladder from the pigsty and hacked the tendrils in front of the window away with a knife. That gave her an unimpeded view of the oaks, the fields and - very occasionally - the sea, and left her free to think about what the word 'study' still meant to her, if anything. Behind her was a divan she'd made her own by covering it with a moss-green cloth. She had stacked a few books on a small table next to it, but didn't read a word. She'd put the portrait of Dickinson in the exact middle of the mantelpiece, in a Blokker picture frame. It was the controversial portrait, a copy of the daguerreotype that had been listed for sale on eBay.

Sometimes the light brown cows stood at the stone wall that separated the fields from her yard; they seemed to know exactly which window she was observing them from. *My yard*. I could do something with that, she thought, smoking one cigarette after another. She wondered which farmer the cows belonged to, where his farmhouse was. These hills brimming with streams and brooks and copses

were much too complicated and confusing for her. Now and then she laid a hand on the Dickinson, running her fingers over the roses on the cover. She bought a pair of secateurs and a pruning saw at a hardware shop in Caernarfon.

6

SHE TOOK THE house as it was. There were a few pieces of furniture, a fridge and a freezer. She bought some rugs (all the rooms had the same bare, wide floorboards) and cushions. Kitchen utensils, saucepans, plates, a kettle. Candles. Two standard lamps. She kept the wood-burning stove in the living room going all day. The kitchen was heated by a typically British cooker that burnt oil from a tank squeezed between the side wall and the stream and hidden from view by a clump of bamboo. The enormous contraption doubled as a water heater. The day she moved in she found handwritten instructions on the kitchen table with a flat stone as a paperweight. Whoever wrote them signed off by wishing her *Good luck!* She wondered very briefly who it could be, but soon dismissed it as irrelevant. She followed the instructions on the piece of paper exactly, step by step, and wasn't really surprised when it fired up. That night she was able to fill the large bath with steaming-hot water.

It was just those geese; they were peculiar. Had she rented the geese too? And one morning a large flock of black sheep suddenly appeared in the field beside the road, every one with a white blaze and a long white-tipped tail. On *her* land. Who did *they* belong to?

7

SHE DISCOVERED THAT the path that led to the stone circle – and went on beyond it, though she’d never been further – joined her drive where it bent sharply. A kissing gate in a thicket of squat oaks was completely overgrown with ivy. By the look of it, nobody had been through it for years. On the far side of the gate was a field with long, brown grass. There had to be a house somewhere; a chicken coop with a dim light that burnt day and night stood a bit further down the drive. She cut away the ivy with her new secateurs and sawed off the thick stems close to the ground. The gate still worked. She found an old-fashioned oil can in the pigsty and oiled the hinges. Only then did she realise that the path followed her drive, then crossed her yard before passing through a second kissing gate in the low stone wall and leading across the fields to the wooden bridge over the stream. A *public footpath*, apparently, and she had a vague recollection of that being something British landowners couldn’t do much about. With the hinges oiled, she walked to the road with the oil can still in her hand and turned right. After a couple of hundred metres she found the sign with the hiker, his legs overgrown with lichen. She didn’t dare climb over the stile, scared as she was of coming out at the house she still hadn’t seen. It was the first time she’d turned right. Caernarfon was to the left. She walked a little further, the sunken road rising slightly. After about ten minutes she reached a T-junction and there she saw the mountain for the first time and realised what a vast landscape existed behind her house and how small an area

she had moved in until that moment. All at once, she became aware of the oil can in her hand. She rubbed a blister on the inside of her thumb and quickly turned back. The geese honked loudly at her, as they had every time she'd walked past. The next day she bought an Ordnance Survey map at an outdoor shop in Caernarfon. Scale: 1-25,000.

8

ON A COLD night she decided to test the small fireplace in her bedroom. She had to open the window. Not to let out smoke, but heat. Even with it open, the room was so hot she had to lie naked on top of the duvet. And instead of thinking about her uncle, she saw the student, the first year. She parted her legs and imagined that her hands were his hands. After a while she turned on the light, not the main one, but the reading lamp on the floor next to the mattress. Her breasts looked monstrous on the white wall, his hands even larger. It was as if the burning wood was sucking all the oxygen out of the small room; she couldn't help but pant. Although there were no neighbours, she kept seeing the dark uncurtained window and herself lying there. Aroused woman alone, fantasising about things long past, things she would be better off forgetting. That unspoilt body, lean and lithe, the powerful arse, the hollows behind the clavicles, the jutting pelvis. The selfishness, the energy and thoughtlessness. Anyone who cared to could look in through the uncovered glass, at least if they took the trouble to lean a ladder against the wall and push aside a few of the creeper's tendrils. Afterwards she smoked a cigarette in the study, still naked. She saw herself sitting there, shivering in the cold. She blew smoke up over her face and thought about him sitting in front of her later, among the other students, one of many, with the face of a sulking child. A spiteful egotistical child, and as ruthless as children can be.

9

THE NEXT DAY the sun was shining. The weather here was nothing like she'd expected; it could be very still and quite warm, even now, deep into the year. Around noon she went to the stone circle. The badgers weren't there. That didn't strike her as strange, almost certain as she was that they were nocturnal. On the detailed map she'd bought she had found a green dotted line running up her drive and across her yard. It even gave the name of her house. The house that belonged to the chicken coop turned out to be less than a kilometre away; there were several farmhouses in the immediate vicinity. The stone circle was indicated by a kind of flower with *stone circle* written next to it in an old-fashioned font. The mountain was Mount Snowdon. At the stone circle she felt like someone was watching her, whereas before it had been almost as if she had discovered it. She took off her clothes and lay on the largest boulder like a cold-blooded animal. It warmed her back. She fell asleep.

For a few nights now the rushing stream no longer calmed her: noises – creaking boards, the shuffling of what she hoped were small animals, and an almost unbearably plaintive cry from the woods – kept her awake, and awake she started thinking. She got wound up again, defiant and angry. She sighed and tossed and turned, imagining what was happening to her body. She also tried to localise the mild, nagging pain. Nagging and not, as she had expected, gnawing: like dozens of tiny beaks slowly but surely eating their way through her insides. Maybe she just responded