

from:

Beasts

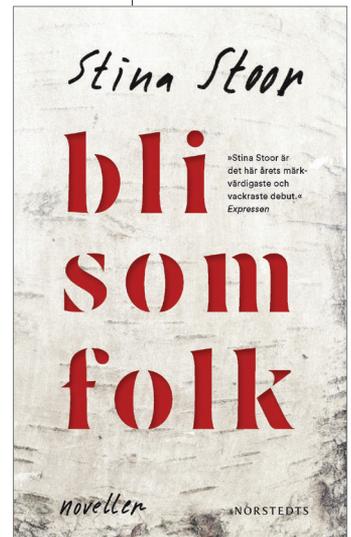
Stina Stoor

introduced and translated by

Nichola Smalley

Stina Stoor's 'Beasts' was the first story she'd ever written, the first story she won a prize with and the first story of her collection *Bli som folk* ('Beasts and Other Stories'). It's a masterful tale that does exactly what a short story should – drops you into a world, shows you the most interesting things about it, and then leaves you, stunned, curious to know about the characters and the world they inhabit.

I was asked to translate *Beasts* a year or two ago – a challenging task, given Stoor's precise use of language – full of dialect, idiolect and a strong sense of place. At the time I didn't think too deeply about it, just ploughed in and enjoyed the wordplay and the captivating oral power of Stoor's voice. Then I read the whole collection and was just blown away by the confidence of this debut writer, portraying a world normally absent from literature: a working-class community in Sweden's rural north. She's a true original, someone set to have a major impact in Swedish literature, and most definitely a name to look out for.



Outside the house there's gravel laid that's constantly sinking down into the mud. Sometimes she picks bits of sharp quartz out of the gravel. There's something special about them. Half-clear crushed mist with edges. Always in need of a wash.

Another day he's there. Dead as green glass and kind of fragile in his own way. First she just pokes with a finger but then she leans her whole child's body against the slightly concave windscreen of the Gustavssons' Saab and picks off the poor little Green-That-Gleams. The dragonfly.

He'd got stuck just under the sun-warmed rubber windscreen wiper and his eyes shine metallicly. Reflectively. Then the dragonfly gets to lie all gangly in her left hand and she holds the other one over him like a roof. Not to hide but to protect him from getting knocked and falling apart. The wings are extraordinarily thin, like flakes of dried yogurt.

Green-That-Gleams is too big for her hands, hanging over a bit, like, so she has to reverse through the worst bits and walk slowly, with her back

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The author was awarded Swedish Radio's Short Story Prize in 2013 for 'Gåvan' (The Gift).

Bli som folk was shortlisted for the August Prize for Fiction in 2015.

Bli som folk was awarded the Katapult Prize for best Swedish Fiction Debut 2016.

as a shield. Not round the corner of the house or over the lawn of course, but through the fireweed. That deep pink jungle realm of hers. Sandra's own, special realm, in the rubbish patch.

There are a thousand narrow paths between the tall stalks, and she takes him in there with her.

Near the ground, the fireweed's stalks are almost bare, you can't see it from the lawn, from there you hardly see anything of all this. Up towards the minxish sunlight, the surface is all flowery and gaudy and summery, but underneath, in there under everything, a load of old junk is hiding, stuff that someone's thrown away. There's bottles and plastic bags under a brown covering of everything that's withered away and landed on top. In the rubbish patch you can find flat tins that once had cured meat in, and round ones with grooves in that might make you think of frankfurters. Though it's all meant to be forgotten, it's like it's on purpose.

In the fireweed there are raspberry bushes that scratch at you if you haven't got many clothes on, and all the way in, with its roots in the cold beck, there's a knotty old currant bush that has sour red currants every year. They're Sandra's special sour currants, it's all hers.

So there.

Seven-league. Singular. Shy and safe. Stable.

She has her safe in the wood-stove by the rowan. There's white and rose quartz in there, mica, marbles with a little twist of colour through them. And more. All that's worth keeping. Like lickety-split Marit's amber bangle and grandma's yellow-white false teeth with their semi-transparent gums. Sandra's compared it with a photograph, so she knows they're right. They were in a buckled zinc pail with no bottom between the bottles and other things from the kitchen.

It's been a long time since anyone baked buns behind the heavy oven door, and in the dark chamber Sandra prepares his court. Then little Green-That-Gleams can lie there, so light and fragile, with his chin on the amber bangle. Afterwards she crouches in front. Looks in and thinks about death. Is sensitive, as Dad puts it.

Everything's really bushy and pink at head height, but she hasn't got there yet. Her tummy is soft and childish in the gap between her vest and her blue jogging bottoms. Her shoes fasten with Velcro instead of being tied and every day they get wet through in the little beck. There's nothing to be done about it.

Big sister Anneli has spots. On her breasts and back she has ugly, yellow-headed lumps. In the shower she almost scrubs away her scary teenage body with the long-handled brush (the one with dark dirt in between the white bristles). She scrubs so hard the heads bleed and then little sister Sandra has to come into the steamy bathroom and put little bits of loo paper onto the bits of Anneli's back she can't reach, otherwise her clothes might get stained. The bits of paper have fuzzy edges. The whiteness sucks up a dark red pupil and looks out. Anneli's whole back fills with eyes while Dad stands hammering on his bathroom door.

'For God's sake, kids!'

If you take too long in the shower he goes down to the cellar and turns off the water. But that wouldn't help now. Not when Anneli is standing naked, dabbing her face with green alcohol from a little bottle, or painting over all

the red-raw patches on her nose and chin with an almost skin-coloured pencil that's perfectly orange.

Sandra fumbles with the latch but can't open it, not when Anneli's giving her a look like that, the death-threat look, which says that you just try it you little suck-up. Just so.

And down the inside of Anneli's leg, the bad one that's skinny and twisted so the heel pokes out and the toes in, there's a rivulet of blood. Just a red streak. A little. Just a little blood. But Sandra gets a lump in her throat and has to turn away and pick at the join in the wallpaper with her nail. The wallpaper is soft and bumpy and in the joins it's dark brown like rust. And the join in the wallpaper is a good place to poke in bogies. The pattern is blue four-leaf clover. Blue, which was Mum's favourite colour. The clovers are evenly spread throughout the little room. In between are the white areas, they're most of it. Carefully spaced white space.

Dad slams the outside door when he leaves. The whole house jumps and cupboards rattle.

'And now 'e's figure out there's a privy outdoors 'n all.'

Says Anneli while she's leaning towards the mirror and sorting that face of hers.

Sandra opens the door and creeps out. It's cooler out in the house and full of breathable air. Sticky yellow fly strips hang from the ceiling collecting small black bodies. The cupboard doors in the kitchen are blue. Not like blueberry jam, because that's actually purple, but like forget-me-nots or bluebells. A big bumblebee is climbing around on the wrong side of the mosquito screen behind the kitchen bench. Sometimes it buzzes and gets cross.

Sandra climbs up and stands on the bench to let the guest out by loosening the green rubber band around the upper window catch, but then Anneli shouts and says Sandra has to go out and ask Dad if he's bought tampons, like: 'Has he?'

And Sandra puts her foot up in the window and presses the bumblebee a little instead.

The green net dents where she presses it and the bumblebee falls down and starts crawling round on the windowsill in a scary way.

'But!'

And Sandra doesn't want to. But she goes anyway, you just have to.

They've mowed all the way up to the privy this year, but the old track still shows, brown and well-worn in the middle. It's there, kind of age-old, with needles and cones. She forbids herself from stepping on the cropped green alongside. Forbids herself from wandering off into the green and getting summer-smitten and just existing, the way she can.

Walking in the tall grass of the



acre with fingers outspread, letting the tufts of the grasses catch on her hands. As though she was stroking the world, taming it.

Or rebuilding the sound in the rubbish patch beck by moving the stones and making small dripping waterfalls and deep thundering ones.

No, in the middle of the old track she steps, carefully, as though on a wire between the roofs of the houses. Because that's the only way to get there in time.

Dad sits with the privy door open and looks pretty good-natured. He squints out at Sandra and the sun so that his whole face turns pitted and stripy and he has to shade his eyes with his big fist. He has blue figures on his arms, women with round tits and bottoms. There are white threads hanging from the bottom of his cut-off jeans and he has no shirt under his brown waistcoat and the sun bores into the hair growing up towards his navel.

Sandra stands there outside with the light warming her back. Dad grins at her in a special way and then he holds out something from behind his back and says a:

'Here Sandra.'

With the kind of Here that means this is for you.

'Here Sandra! 'E's a plump one and no mistake!'

And Sandra takes a half-step in and takes it. Prince-Plash-Into-Your-Heart, like. Kind of sudden, a creature of paradise.

'He's so big! So...!'

The froggy belly is mostly pale yellow but a little speckled. Between the long toes, there's rust-red webbing and the frog has proper fingers with joints that bend. Mechanical parts. Froggy hands like a little baby, the kind that grabs your fingers and holds on tight. Sandra smiles and Dad looks perfectly proud. The Big Hunter. The Big Man. Although Anneli probably would have said Bonehead, so Sandra hides herself a little in the frog when she's about to say that:

'Ah Anneli has got her period again now Dad did you buy them there tampons?'

Then:

'Not been buyin' nowt me!' he replies. 'Er pocket money's gone up since that started! You go tell 'er what the doings are wi' that!'

And Sandra looks down at Dad's black clogs which are scuffed a bit grey on the front of the leather. There on the floor of the privy lie the remains of some old wasps' nest, it looks like paper strips. In the paper strips there's a big flying ant crawling around which Dad squashes with his foot.

'Y'know, them there ants Sandra, they'll go eat our 'ouse up one day.'

He takes the roll and with his right hand starts gathering the outdoor-wrinkled loo paper to wipe himself with.

Sandra balances on her tightrope back towards the house. The creature of paradise filling her hands. The yellow eyes, the mouth as wide as its whole head. Its stomach is so pale and bulging.

When she gets round the corner of the house, Anneli's already out on the veranda with just her pants on and she has some kind of ponytail but strands of her blonde hair still hang down over the orange-painted patches on her breasts.

Anneli has lit one of Dad's John Silvers and says:

'It's Jack and John and me, right?'

So you hear she's trying to sound like Dad, but she's in pain or something so instead of coming out the right way it's whiney, though Dad never says it like that.

Anneli's breasts are like the teats of Ove Jonsson's bitch with their marks and patches and swellings, and the way they're naked is kind of similar. Naked without looking nice. Like when the bitch had her pups around her and the pups pulled and tore at her and crawled over one another and they were blind and black and squeaked and whined and the teats sagged out of her doggy body, which was otherwise the way you'd expect, with its fur and wagging tail and everything. Hairless saggy sacks with squeals.

'Look what Dad gave me!'

Says Sandra, and Prince Plash is naked as the day, smooth and lethargic. He moves his froggy legs a little, although it's not as though he's struggling, he's just like, moving. Then he settles again and becomes calm and heavy in her small hands. The froggy legs are longer and thinner than you'd think when they're hanging there. His belly is smooth and pale as the lining of the purse in Anneli's drawer. Just so. Special.

'Had 'e bought 'em then?'

'Nah. It's probably nowt to do with 'im anyway,' says Sandra.

'It bloomin' well is! Can't even get into me jeans with this fuckin' nappy on me arse! Look!'

And Anneli turns around so she can see. On her back there are still a few little paper squares with dark eyes but her pants are mostly just blue with elastic lace on the edges.

'This what 'e calls parenting eh?'

'Er, nah.'

Anneli puts the cigarette out in the empty flowerpot that hangs on the railing.

'Fuck!'

Sandra stays out on the verandra when Anneli's gone in to tear all her hopeless clothes out of the wardrobe. She sits there on the bottom step, stroking the angular bony bumps the frog has on his back.

'So. There, there.'

She comforts him.

He's mostly brown anyway and Sandra's hands always have brown streaks in the creases. It fits somehow. Belongs.

Later when Dad comes he has a ten-litre bucket with him. The frog can live in there. They put him under the veranda and Dad's happy, whistling his never-ending Harder Gold song. He calls the frog all kinds of fine.

'What a grand son-in-law 'e'll be, if I may say so! We can only hope he don't lure you into no scrapes, eh Sandra lass!'

And like he always does, Dad touches Sandra's chin. Puts his thumb in front and rubs his rough index finger underneath. And he grins right in her face at close range. And Dad's stubble is like short copper wires. He's sun-tanned but white in his wrinkles. His nose is where he's reddest. It has dimples just like a strawberry but without the green dots.