

# THE LITTLE ANIMALS

by

Sarah Tolmie



SEATTLE



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*magnae animae*  
*Ursula K. Le Guin*



## THE GOOSE GIRL

It is Pentecost. *Pinksteren*. Tomorrow a girl crowned with flowers will parade across the square in front of the Nieuwe Kerk, the bride of spring, followed by a heckling crowd of off-work apprentices. Couples will start courting. Pastors will give thanks for the gift of tongues.

Today geese and their babble occupy the square. Antoni Van Leeuwenhoek is at the market, bargaining. He is a man of middle height, middling complexion, and sober gray eyes, just beginning to get stout, with an itchy dark wig slightly askew. An ordinary man, though this is not his ordinary occupation. He ought to be opening his draper's shop this minute. The housemaid ought to be doing the shopping. But Leeuwenhoek is a most particular man. He prefers to do things himself. So here he is, choosing geese for quills. It is a hateful task, but he is desperate. He has arrived early to beat the tide of arrow-fledgers, down-pullers, scribes, and gluttons. His task outranks all these, did they but know it. Natural philosophy!

The smell of the tarred feet of the huge flock on the air is overpowering. Drovers' dogs guard the laneways. The sounds of hissing and honking are deafening. Some of the green geese are strung on lines, string protruding from the asshole of one into the throat of the next. Herders have fed them fat pork that they will eat and re-eat. Geese are revolting. The drovers are not much better. This is idiots' work. Many are drunk, or slack-faced, or crazy. Getting enough sense out of them to make a deal is a chore. It is the same thing every year.

Suddenly through the gaggle of halfwits and yelling birds the blonde head of a child appears, a girl leading a troop of a dozen geese in a perfect line, like soldiers on parade. She is not much bigger than they are and has no dog, nor even a staff. Her geese are celestially white and twice as big as the others, like harvest birds. They are silent. Their flat feet are bare, except for the first one, which appears to be wearing little red leather boots. They pace past like visiting noblemen. Leeuwenhoek is stunned. Children rarely take animals on the roads, and certainly not girls. It is not like herding them at home. A pasture is one thing, the open road quite another. What can her parents, or her employers, possibly be thinking? A wash of quietness spreads out from the girl and her geese as they cut diagonally through the square, the raucous birds calming, the drovers and householders turning to watch in amazement. He thinks feverishly, Look at the size of them! Think of the feathers! A dozen birds that size, at this season—seventy-two premium quills. Enough for a year, even with all the writing he does. He begins jostling through the crowd in her wake, as the others are still gaping, determined to reach her before some housewife or arbalester's apprentice gets there first. He will buy the lot.

Toiling across the square, trying to avoid bites from enraged geese, he meets precisely the person he had hoped would not be here. Johannes. Now, struggling through the throng, he must struggle with his conscience as well. The man is improvident, infuriating, and disorderly, but he is a great painter. He is a friend. He is even a client, though this is not the moment at which to wonder whether the camera will ever be paid for. He swats away the head of an importuning goose.

“Vermeer!” he shouts over the head of a cross-eyed drover, “go home! You cannot afford those prize geese! I am buying them!” One of the painter’s many off-putting habits is haggling for things he cannot buy.

“Antoni!” returns the painter, a smallish dark man, likewise making his way across the square, although much more slowly, ceremoniously standing aside for passing drovers, stopping to let the more determined geese go by. He is not making much headway, and Leeuwenhoek passes him by like a meteor, cutting a swathe through the milling necks. He looks back to see Vermeer standing, doffing his cap, whether to a goose or a person he cannot see, a dark blot in the midst of a rippling, cacophonous, white canvas.

By the time the harried artist has made his way across the square, Leeuwenhoek has bought the geese. At least, he thinks he has. He accomplished this by glaring down several affronted women already waiting there, then trying vainly to speak to the goose girl over the din—could she be deaf? —before spinning her around by the shoulder and thrusting all the money he has into her hands. She is still staring at him, grimy and confused, seemingly unable to speak, as Vermeer straggles out of the crowd.

“Johannes, I have bought them,” he says warningly, before the painter can speak. He looks at the girl for some sign of assent. She appears uncomprehending. Leeuwenhoek makes a gesture toward the geese, gathering them to himself, and then pats her tiny, dirty hands holding the money. It is a reasonable sum for twelve geese in prime condition, though perhaps not enough for her extraordinary birds. She finally appears to understand what has happened, looking at the coins for the first time. She is suddenly delighted and does a little, wriggling dance.

Leeuwenhoek nods firmly, as though they have just shaken hands on the deal. The wonderful geese are his.

Vermeer sighs. “Will you at least sell me a few quills?” he asks. “I need new pencils in the worst way.”

Leeuwenhoek looks at him severely, trying to muster up his better judgment. It eludes him. “Fine, fine! Of course!” he replies.

Vermeer, looking hopeful, continues, “And some of those fine metal clamps you made for the ends? To hold the brush hairs?”

“Yes,” he says, shortly.

He turns back to the goose girl. He has no idea how to part her from her geese, still strangely silent and attentive, like a group of nuns. He has no idea how to herd geese. He asks the girl, carefully looking into her face, speaking slowly, Can you bring them to my house? She nods solemnly. Leeuwenhoek turns abruptly, relieved, and begins to walk away, toward home. The girl follows him, silently. The geese follow her, silently, in a perfect line. He feels like a bishop. Vermeer wanders along beside them, looking at the goose girl.

What marvelous hair you have, he says to her after a while, conversationally. The girl’s hair is filthy and partially covered with a kerchief, but it is indeed splendid and copious. She looks over at him and smiles brightly.

“Have you ever cut it?” he continues.

She shakes her head.

“Never?”

She shakes her head once more.

“Good God,” Vermeer mutters to himself, squinting at her. Leeuwenhoek glances back at him speculatively. “Virgin hair, Antoni! Look at it! Perfect! Better than sable!”

“Johannes, you have a house full of children with hair for paintbrushes,” says Leeuwenhoek.



“They are all born bald and their mother has coarse hair! It’s not my fault!” replies the painter in piteous tones. Leeuwenhoek laughs. The girl ignores their conversation, marching straight ahead.

Leeuwenhoek’s house is close by, near the fish market. The geese follow the girl obediently into the rear courtyard. There is no gate, as he keeps no other fowl or domestic animals, except cats. He is a townsman. He has no use for country nuisances. The addition of twelve live geese is going to be a bit of a surprise for his wife. Soon enough, though, they will all be hanging somewhere and he will be preparing quills. The larder is Barbara’s domain. Meanwhile, he will just have to block the entrance with something so they do not escape. He looks around for some suitable object. The girl stands still in the middle of his courtyard, surrounded by flowerpots, the geese standing around her in a precise semi-circle, like a choir waiting for its cue.

“You appear to have bought her, too,” says Vermeer bemusedly, pausing briefly at the entrance. “Mind you keep her well. That hair is priceless.” He continues on his way.

Leeuwenhoek stands uncertainly. He shuffles his feet. The goose girl stands among her adoring subjects with her back to him. He walks around to face her, behind the ring of geese. The light is behind her, so her small face is shadowed, while the golden ends of her heavy hair under the kerchief appear molten. A light, clear, toneless voice says: “Do not worry. They will not leave. I am here.”

Leeuwenhoek is shocked, as if he had never heard anyone speak before. It is as if one of the geese had spoken. The goose with the red boots looks at him inquiringly. The girl is still.

“Aha, you do, ah, speak,” he says, stumbling over his words, which suddenly seem remarkable coming out of his mouth.

“Yes,” she says.

“Where did you come from?” he asks. “It can’t have been far. Their feet are bare, and none are lame.”

“It was far. We came slowly. And the tar does no good. It makes their feet rot.”

“Why is this one wearing boots? Who made them?”

“I made them,” she says. “He has tender feet.”

“Where did you get the leather?”

“I traded a goose for it, in Kampen. She did not like me.”

“But these ones do?”

“Yes.”

“They will stay in the yard and not run away?”

“Yes, if I tell them.”

“Tell them, then,” Leeuwenhoek says and watches her curiously. The girl says nothing, to him or the geese, but makes a brief shrugging gesture, a dismissal, a bit like casting seed. The geese, receiving their *congé*, disperse and begin to wander, nibbling at the flowers in the pots. The girl stands unmoving like a wound-down clockwork.

“Can you go home now? Will they stay?”

“Home?” asks the girl, as if repeating a foreign word. She is silent a moment. “Yes, they will stay. Why do you want so many geese?”

“I need pens,” says Leeuwenhoek. The girl looks blank.

“Quills. For writing. The long wing feathers.”

“Oh!” she replies, seeming relieved, “Then you won’t need to kill them.”

“I won’t?” he says, confused.

“Oh no,” says the girl, confidently. “I can pluck them. Two times a year, sometimes three, if you feed them well.”

“Truly?” he asks, doubtfully. “Do the feathers grow back so fast? At the same quality?”

“They will,” the girl assures him. “The birds will scream and bleed, but I will sing to them and they will forget.”

Leeuwenhoek is not keen to become a goose farmer. He has quite enough jobs already, and not all of them make money, as his wife is constantly reminding him. He looks at the enormous, eerily white birds now busy destroying his flowers. One beats the air with perfect, powerful wings, the flight feathers spread out like fingers. He looks at the goose girl.

“What is your name?” he asks finally, as if conceding defeat.

“I do not know,” says the girl. “Why do I need one? I can tell you their names, if you like. That is Redboots, and that one is Pansy, that one is Scratch...”

Having been introduced to all the geese in turn, and still uncertain what to do about the girl, Leeuwenhoek goes inside. He sits down at the table in the great room of his house and stares anxiously at the small vase of cuckoo flowers that sits in its own reflection on the highly polished surface. He blew the glass himself and is proud of it, although he has no intention of telling anyone he is a glassblower. It is a professional secret. The vase sits here in plain view all the time, a private joke. Most townspeople of Delft think he is a solid citizen, a draper, a good man of business; a very few interested in such things know him as a lens-grinder, a maker of fine optical instruments. Nothing so frivolous as a glassblower. Guests coming in to his fine paneled room assume it is a Venetian trinket, one that goes with the paintings on the walls, the display of silver and ceramics on the mantel.

And that is the least of the secrets, he reflects, that this vase holds.

Leeuwenhoek knows that it contains a whole new world, stranger and more populous than the Americas: the world of the *animalcule*. Inside everything we see, everything we touch, this world opens, vaster than the abyss: there is no need to sail off perilously in ships to find it. He may be the greatest explorer in the Republic, and he has never been further than Maastricht. Not that most of his neighbors in the prosperous merchants' town of Delft will believe it, until this precious world that he has discovered through his microscopes yields up items as valuable as tobacco or potatoes or tulips. He has about as much chance of convincing them about the importance of *animalcules* as he would have of convincing that poor simple girl outside.

And what is he to do with her? He just set out to buy geese. Geese! Messy, aimless, honking waddlers, yet, perversely, he needs them, or at least their feathers, in order to record the astonishing new world that he is beginning to find, full of lives as strange to us as those of angels.



Three weeks later Leeuwenhoek knows the names of all of the geese, but not the girl. She is indifferent. He has changed the name of Redboots to Caligula. He is indifferent. The girl is cleaner but still strange and silent.

"She's an odd one," says Barbara. "It's not that I mind keeping her. Now that she's washed, at least. I can't imagine how she's lived so far, poor creature. It's like she's a goose herself. She can tell me nothing about where she came from."

The girl sleeps in the pantry, cares for the geese in the yard, and herds them back and forth at intervals from a pasture he has rented outside of town. He has ordered her, and even pleaded with her, not to keep them over-

night in the fields, but she pays no attention. She does not understand his fears. She looks at him stolidly, silently, and then does exactly as she pleases. Mostly she brings them back at night, but not always. She claims that they like to graze at dawn, and that the morning dew is good for them.

Barbara has tried a few names for her—Hannah, Bieke, Anna, Grietje—but none of them have stuck. She responds if addressed directly, but that is all.

“The names just slide off her, somehow,” says his wife, mystified. “I can’t keep track of the one I’ve just called her. She doesn’t care at all. She’s just the girl, the goose girl.”

“Think of it like a title,” Leeuwenhoek suggests.

“She does have a certain majesty,” Barbara replies. “But I’ll call her Grietje if the neighbors ask.”

“Why would they?”

“People are naturally curious, Antoni,” says Barbara, tartly, “about other people. It’s only you who are exclusively concerned with bugs.”

“Bugs! What? No! They’re not bugs, these little animals I see through the microscopes, as I’m always telling you, Barbara—”

“Bugs. Plants. Bits of wood. Scraps of cloth. Dirt. Water droplets.”

“Natural philosophy!”

“The *crebbemeester* has already been to see me about the goose droppings. He knows we’ve taken in the girl. If she leaves our service he’ll alert the orphanage. She’s our responsibility now.”

“It’s very good of you to do this, Barbara,” says Leeuwenhoek, humbly. “Geese. Strange children. It’s a lot to take on. And all for a few quills. It’s just—”

“I know, Antoni. I know. Natural philosophy! If this passion spreads there will be a shortage of quills across

the Seven Provinces! You might as well be a scrivener!" She wags her finger at him in mock severity and then continues more seriously, "We seem to have gotten beyond quills, though, haven't we? Now it's about that girl, the poor child."

"We could just slaughter the geese and keep her anyway, as a kitchen maid, I suppose."

"Could we? What would she do? She has no skills in the house. I don't think she's lived in one for years. She can barely talk. If we killed those geese I think she would go mad. Or madder than she is already. They are her family. Her flock."

"She might be a companion for Marieke."

"She shuns Marieke. I think she is afraid of her, afraid of other children."

"So we leave it as it is?"

"Yes," says Barbara. "Of course, it is all quite crazy." She has a good heart.



Leeuwenhoek is in possession of twelve new quills, the longest wing feathers of Redboots-now-Caligula and the goose called Scratch. They are drying on a reed rack in his study. In his eagerness, he has even dried one over the fire—a fussy business, holding the shaft with clamps and rotating it over the flames like a tiny roast. When he sharpened it, the shaft was so hard it felt like porcelain. He had to whet his knives to trim it properly.

The rest he will point as he goes: it is better that they dry naturally. The birds had screamed horribly, the way women yell in labor, in deep, vibrating, gasping grunts, as the girl pulled out the feathers. He had been watching from the kitchen window. She had laid them across her lap and doubled up their necks under her arm, and,

flexing one wing at a time, yanked out the three main feathers on each side. All the time her mouth had been moving in some soundless song. Afterward, they had tumbled off her lap, trembling and tottering, and rejoined the rest of the flock, which had been standing in a frozen silence, clustered against the furthest wall. Soon enough they had all been drifting and browsing together. The girl had brought him the handful of feathers matter-of-factly. Their tips were bloody.

“It would be best to feed them grain for a few days now,” she had said.

“Yes,” he had replied, hurriedly, “I will order some.”

“If that is all you need,” she had continued, “I will pasture them now.”

“Yes, go ahead. Do.” Casting around for something to say, he had asked, “Are they flightless now, those two?”

“Yes.”

“So the others could fly and leave them behind?”

“They would never.”

“No?”

“No. A flock sticks together. They almost never fly, anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because I walk.”

She had led them all off to pasture then in their customary perfect line, the recovered Caligula strutting in front in his red boots, unperturbed.

## THE HANDKERCHIEF

Although the goose girl rarely speaks aloud, she can often be heard muttering to herself. The housemaid has spoken of this to Barbara, and even to him. Finally she prevails upon both of them to go and overhear her, very early in the morning, as she lies on her pallet on the pantry floor. So there they are: the anxious maid, Anneliese, dressed and aproned, husband and wife still in their night clothes, Barbara holding up a candle in the darkened kitchen, all of them crouched before the closed pantry door. Leeuwenhoek feels a fool, but he senses that Barbara is rather enjoying herself. She glances at him conspiratorially over the lowered candle flame.

Through the door they hear a steady stream of chatter, then a pause, perhaps a question, followed by another brief spate, as if she were talking to someone.

“You see?” whispers the maid fearfully, “She is mad.”

“Perhaps she is talking to the angels, Anneliese,” Barbara replies.

“Or praying,” says Leeuwenhoek. He straightens up. “I can’t see that it is hurting anyone. She talks to the geese all the time. Who else has she had to talk to? Just let her alone.”

Anneliese looks unconvinced. “I don’t like that girl,” she says. “She’s unnatural. She never looks at me. She won’t speak to me. She only talks to the geese. Like the rest of us weren’t there at all. She’s not right in the head.”



“That may be, Anneliese,” says Barbara. “But I don’t think she’s dangerous, and we’ve taken her in. She was desperate. It’s only charitable.”

“She’s filthy and covered in fleas, all over scabs...” The maid wipes her hands on her apron.

“Not any more. Not for weeks. I’ve practically scrubbed her skin off.”

“I’m afraid of her.”

“Anneliese,” says Barbara firmly, “look at her. She’s tiny. She’s a small girl. She cannot possibly harm you. She looks after the geese and leaves you alone. Let her be. She’s hardly ever in the house. Only for mealtimes, and often not even then.”

“Why are we keeping geese, anyway?” counters the maid, “We’ve never even eaten one. What do we need them all for? What do we need her for?”

Barbara and Leeuwenhoek look at each other helplessly.

“Natural philosophy,” says Barbara.

“Human decency,” says Leeuwenhoek.

The door opens. “Why are you all standing in the kitchen in the dark?” asks the goose girl. She shows no surprise. The maid looks as though she is about to say something, but Barbara glares at her, so she crosses the room to tend the fire.

“We woke early,” Leeuwenhoek replies.

“I will go to the geese now,” says the girl. She is about to go, and then stops, looking at Barbara. “Can I have some food to take with me?”

Anneliese snorts disapprovingly in the background.

“Of course,” says Barbara. “Bread and cheese?”

The girl nods soundlessly. Barbara cuts the bread and cheese herself, generous slices, and ties them into a yellow linen cloth. She hands them to the girl. The child

does not thank her, but takes the food reverently, holding the bundle close to her body with both hands. She slips out the door.

Barbara turns sharply toward Anneliese and says, with finality, “I will hear no more foolishness about that girl. She is a member of our household, and she eats at our table. With us, with you. No more need be said.”

“Mevrouw,” replies Anneliese.



Later that morning Leeuwenhoek sees the girl in the courtyard talking to her handkerchief. He is surprised to find that she carries one. Cleanliness is not one of her objects. Usually she stinks of geese. She still has to be occasionally, more or less forcibly, bathed, with his wife standing over the tub. She is a tolerant woman, Barbara, but she would never allow an object as greasy and reeking as the goose girl had been to share a house with her only daughter.

The girl’s fine linen handkerchief is filthy, no good for cleaning anything. Leeuwenhoek, looking from the window, sees her small form sitting on an upturned bucket, smoothing a wide square of cloth across her knees, plucking it and straightening it, addressing it earnestly, her head bent down, shoulders hunched. Leeuwenhoek sees that the white fabric is covered with what look like bloodstains: three great darkened splotches. The girl is staring at them raptly. The geese bustle around her and she ignores them. Her lips are moving.

Unable to contain his curiosity, Leeuwenhoek steps toward her quietly across the courtyard. “Are you talking to the geese?” he asks.

“No,” says the girl, “to the little animals.”

“The what?” asks Leeuwenhoek, sharply.

She continues dreamily, still looking down. “I thought it was my mother talking for the longest time. She died long ago. This was her hankie. It started speaking to me in the forest, during the winter.”

“In the forest? What forest? This winter?” He is momentarily distracted from her impossible reply about the little animals, which he must have misheard.

“I don’t know,” she says, “just the forest. In winter. I saw many strange things there. The blood spots began to speak to me there. But not with just one voice, and nothing like my mother’s. I think there are little animals in the blood.”

“Little animals?” says Leeuwenhoek, with a feeling of unreality. “They speak? To you? How?”

“It is not exactly speaking. Sometimes it is like singing, heard very far away.”

“What, in words?”

“No, not words. Feelings just unfold, sort of, inside me.”

“The animalcules—the little animals—can you see them? What do they look like? What do they say?”

“I cannot see them. They are too small. Sometimes they are hungry, or angry. They want to grow. There seem to be fewer now than there were before.”

“Is it only from the blood that they speak?”

“I hear them best from there. That is where I am used to listening. But I think they are everywhere.”

“My God,” says Leeuwenhoek, in amazement. “Have you told anybody else?”

“No. Why? Can you hear them, too?”

“No,” he replies, with a rush of pride, “But I can see them.”

“Ah,” says the goose girl with innocent satisfaction. “Can you see them now? Do you have your own blood?”

“No,” says Leeuwenhoek, “I need a machine, called a microscope. It makes tiny things appear big. You have to look through a lens, a special kind of eye. I have not yet looked at blood. Only water. And wood. And cloth. And grass. Some other things.”

“You should look at blood. There are many animals in it,” says the girl.

“Thank you,” he replies, “I will.” He stands there, nonplussed.

The goose girl folds up her handkerchief carefully and tucks it into her bosom. As she rises from the bucket, the geese look up at her attentively. She nods approvingly at them, at him. Leeuwenhoek’s audience is over. She leads the geese away to pasture. He watches them waddle out of the new gate, hearing the tiny slaps of their flat feet on the cobbles as they depart. The interlocking pattern of the now-empty stones assaults his eyes, and he stares down at it fixedly until the lines begin to swim. He feels nauseous. Swaying slightly, he goes in.



Grinding lenses is tedious, painstaking business. It is also, he has learned, largely unnecessary. Nonetheless, he spends a certain amount of time doing it, for the microscopes he sells or displays. They are his bait. People admire them and even buy them, but they are misdirection, such as conjurors perform at fairs with walnut shells. Grinding is fiddly, repetitive work, but it affords him time to think.

He sits at the lathe in his study, buffing a nearly finished lentil of glass held in a form with soft leather. He cannot trust himself to do anything else, as his hands are trembling. He simply cannot believe the foregoing conversation. That a child who has grown up half-wild and

half-starved on fields and roads might hear voices, that he can accept. Half her compatriots, herders and drovers, are insane. Anneliese's assessment of the girl is probably quite right. What he cannot account for is his own opinion. More conscientiously, his own desire. He *wants* the girl to be hearing *animalcules*.

Surely that is what they must be, these little animals that the girl hears? Animalcules? The minuscule creatures that he sees, so many times magnified? What else could they be? They must be! The girl may be mad, but that need not prevent her from speaking the truth. Churchmen impute a certain kind of truth to the mad, a holy innocence. That must be what it is. After all, he has worried from time to time about his own sanity. He sees monsters: creatures more bizarre than those painted by Bosch, with many legs and no heads and bodies that make no sense. And it seems they are omnipresent. They infect the world like lice. The goose girl claims that they feel angry, hungry. He has never thought about their feelings. What do they want of us, the *animalcules*? Do they know we are here? Are they our enemies?

We are greatly outnumbered.

But people are made in God's image. Compared to animalcules we are huge, gods ourselves. They inhabit us as we inhabit the world.

We are worlds.

Such thoughts give him vertigo. They make him fear that he is living through a monstrous time, in which infinity is creeping into everything. Occasionally he has looked through the artificial eye of the microscope and has had to clutch the table for fear of falling in. Into the inexplicable, teeming world of the animalcule, in which he would not last a minute but would be torn apart by millions of chomping jaws. Likewise he has looked at

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the sky, that space above the terrestrial sphere that has suddenly, horribly expanded into unguessable distances filled with huge masses, and felt himself shooting unfathomably upward. Such are the perils of the lens-maker.

Does the goose girl hear the stars singing, as well?

He should just send her away.