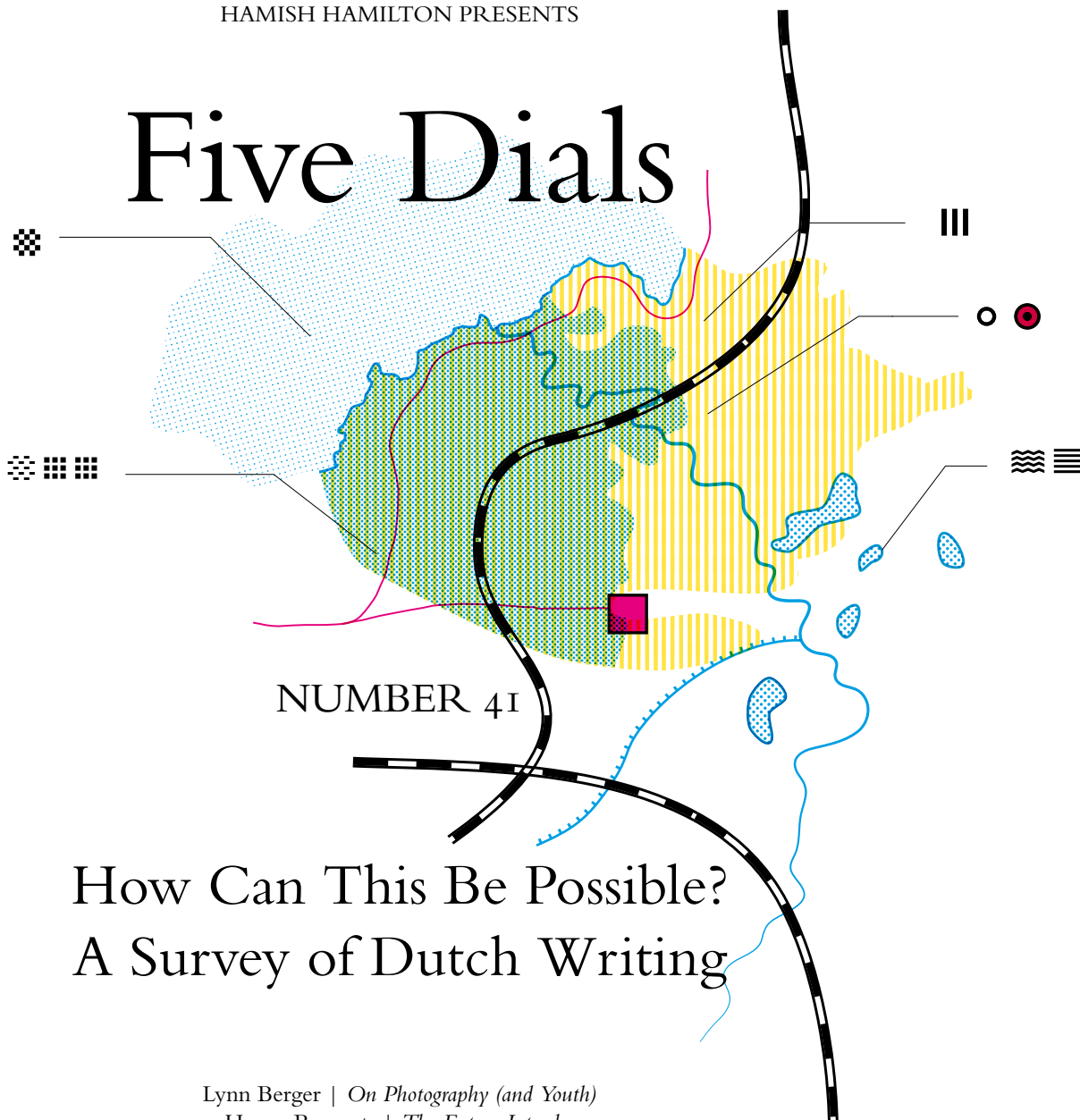


HAMISH HAMILTON PRESENTS

# Five Dials



NUMBER 41

## How Can This Be Possible? A Survey of Dutch Writing

Lynn Berger | *On Photography (and Youth)*  
Hanna Bervoets | *The Future Intrudes*  
Thijs de Boer | *Walking in Circles*  
Philip Huff | *Love Gone Wrong*  
Mustafa Stitou | *Five Poems*  
Nina Polak | *At the Zoo*  
Niña Weijers | *Lets In the Light*  
Maartje Wortel | *You Know What Happens Next*  
Iris Le Rütte | *Ten Paintings*

*Plus: Thomas Heerma van Voss (very nearly) conquers the world of independent publishing; poetry by Ester Naomi Perquin; and some traditional Dutch games... or are they? Is this what the Dutch do for fun?*



# Contributors

**LYNN BERGER** is a staff writer at *De Correspondent*, an online journalism platform based in Amsterdam, where she writes about technology and culture. She recently finished her PhD at Columbia University in New York; her dissertation dealt with photography as a new medium and a new profession in the nineteenth-century United States.

**ERICA MOORE** is the Translations Editor at *De Correspondent* — ‘your antidote to the daily news grind’. She lives below sea level in Amsterdam with her partner and two boys, and after working on Lynn’s piece, she can’t decide whether to photograph them all less or lots more.

**HANNA BERVOETS** writes novels, essays, and screenplays. She won the 2009 Debut of the Year Award for her first novel, *Or, How, Why*. Its follow-up, *Dear Céline*, was awarded the Opzij Literature Prize 2012 for best book by a female Dutch author. It has since been adapted for the big screen. After *Dear Céline*, she made her breakthrough as a novelist with the acclaimed bestseller, *Everything There Was*. Her next novel, *Efter*, was nominated for the BNG New Literature Prize and was selected for the longlist of the Golden Book Owl and the Libris Literature Prize. The film rights of *Efter* have been sold to prominent Dutch producer NL Film. Bervoets’ fifth novel, *Ivanov*, was released to acclaim in January 2016.

**JONATHAN REEDER**, a native of New York and longtime resident of Amsterdam, enjoys a dual career as a literary translator and performing musician. Alongside his work as a professional bassoonist, he translates opera libretti and essays on classical music, as well as contemporary Dutch fiction, non-fiction and poetry.

**THIJS DE BOER** was born in 1981. His debut, the short story collection *Vogels die vlees eten (Birds That Eat Meat)*, was published in 2010. It was called ‘one of the great literary surprises of the year’. The book was shortlisted for the Dutch Best Debut Award and Dutch/Belgian Youth Literature Award. He is now working on his first novel.

After finishing her studies at the University of Manchester, **LIZ WATERS** worked for some years with English-language texts and at a literary agency in Amsterdam before becoming a full-time translator of literary fiction and non-fiction. Authors whose books she has translated include Lieve Joris, Luuk van Middelaar, Geert Mak and Annelies Verbeke.

Astronomer and writer **LUCAS ELLERBROEK** studied Theoretical Physics and obtained a PhD in Astrophysics at the University of Amsterdam. His debut, *Planetenjagers (Planet Hunters)*, a popular scientific account of the search for extraterrestrial life, was published in 2014. The book received many accolades and was translated into Spanish; an English translation will appear in 2017. Ellerbroek is well known in the Netherlands for his television appearances and TedX talks, and for co-founding Nerd Nite Amsterdam. Currently, he works as a postdoctoral researcher in planet formation at the UvA and as a freelance journalist for *NRC Handelsblad* and science youth magazine *Kijk*.

**PHILIP HUFF** is a novelist, essayist, and screenwriter. He was born in 1984 and graduated from the University of Amsterdam with a degree in both philosophy and history. Huff is the author of the novels *Days of Grass* (2009), *The Empty City* (2012), and *Book of the Dead* (2014); the short story collection *Good to be Here* (2013); and the essay collection *The Grief of Others* (2015), all in Dutch. Huff won the DJP Literary Award and the Hollands Maandblad Prize for Prose. He wrote the screenplays for three films: *Days of Grass*, based on his debut novel; *Greenland* (2015), based on one of his short stories; and the forthcoming *The Empty City*, based on the novel of the same name, to be directed by Michiel van Erp.

**ESTER NAOMI PERQUIN** grew up in the Dutch province of Zeeland but has lived in Rotterdam for most of her adult life. She put herself through creative writing school by working as a prison guard for four years and draws on this experience often in her work. Perquin published her first collection of poetry *Napkins at Half-Mast* (2007) at the age of twenty-seven and has published two more collections since: *In the Name of the Other* (2009) and *Cell Inspections* (2012). Her fourth collection, *Multiple Absence*, will be published this year. She won the Netherlands’ most prestigious prize for a single collection, the VSB Poetry Prize, for *Cell Inspections*. Besides poetry, Perquin writes essays, short stories, columns and articles for newspapers and magazines, gives workshops and masterclasses, and co-hosts a national arts and culture radio show.

**MUSTAFA STITOU** was born in 1974 in Tetouan, Morocco, and grew up in Lelystad, in Holland. He lives in Amsterdam, where he studied philosophy at the UvA.

He has published four collections of poetry: *Mijn Vormen* (*My Forms*, 1994); *Mijn Gedichten* (*My Poems*, 1998); *Varkensroze Ansichten* (*Pig-Pink Picture Postcards*, 2003), winner of the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize; and *Tempel* (*Temple*, 2013), winner of the Awater Poetry Prize.

**DAVID COLMER** is an Australian literary translator who is based in Amsterdam and mostly translates Dutch-language literature. He has won many prizes for his work, including the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, both with novelist Gerbrand Bakker. His most recent translations are *Window-cleaner Sees Paintings*, a selection of the poetry of Menno Wigman, and *Occupied City*, the first English translation of Paul van Ostaijen's dadaist classic. *The Hunger in Plain View*, his selection of the poetry of Ester Naomi Perquin, will be published by White Pine Press in spring 2017, and he is currently working on a selection of Mustafa Stitou's poetry for Phoneme Media.

**NINA POLAK** was born in 1986. She studied Dutch literature at the University of Amsterdam and Cultural Analysis at the New School University in New York. She is an editor of the online media platform *De Correspondent* and she occasionally writes for *De Groene Amsterdammer*. She is the author of one novel, *The Waves Below*.

**VIVIEN D. GLASS** is a literary translator from Dutch and German to English. Born in Switzerland to Irish and Swiss parents, she moved to the Netherlands in 1995, where she completed a Bachelor's degree at the ITV University of Applied Sciences for Translation and Interpreting. Her published translations include works of fiction, non-fiction, poetry, children's verse and more.

**THOMAS HEERMA VAN VOSS** made his debut with the novel *The Everything Table* (2009). Afterwards he wrote — in addition to many articles, stories and essays — the critically applauded novel *Stern* (2013, German translation 2016), and the short story collection *The Third Person* (2014).

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**NIÑA WEIJERS** was born in Nijmegen in 1987 and studied literary theory in Amsterdam and Dublin. She published short stories, essays and articles in various literary magazines, such as *Das Magazin*, *De Gids* and *De Revisor*. In 2010 she won the writing competition *Write Now!*. She's a regular contributor to the weekly magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*, and an editor of *De Gids*. Her debut novel *The Consequences* (*De consequenties*) was published in 2014. It won the Anton Wachter Prize 2014 for best first novel, the Opzij Prize, the Lucy B. & C.W. van der Hoogt Prize, and was shortlisted for the Libris Prize and the Gouden Boekenuil, the two most important Dutch and Flemish literary awards. *The Consequences* will be translated into English (Doppelhouse Press, 2017), French (Actes Sud, Fall 2016), German (Suhrkamp, August 2016) and Czech (Kniha Zlín, 2017).

**SARAH WELLING** grew up in a bilingual family with roots in North London and the eastern Netherlands. She studied English and Latin American literature and has worked as a bookseller, language trainer and editor. She currently lives in Amsterdam, where she earns her living as a web editor and literary translator.

**MAARTJE WORTEL** was born in 1982. She's the author of the novels *Half mens* and *Ijstijd*, which were both critically acclaimed and won her the Anton Wachterprijs and the BNG Literature prize. *De Volkskrant* (Holland's biggest newspaper) called her 'literary talent of the year'. Her most recent publication is the short novel *Goldfish and Concrete*.

**MICHELE HUTCHISON** is a British translator, editor and writer living in Amsterdam. She translates Dutch and French fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels and poetry. Recent translations include *Roxy* by Esther Gerritsen and *La Superba* by Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer. She is currently translating *The American Princess* by Annejet van der Zijl.

**IRIS LE RÛTTE** is visual artist and poet living in Amsterdam. She makes large sculptures for public spaces. Her work has been collected in major corporate collections such as Akzo Nobel (Amsterdam) and MeesPierson (London), and in museums such as *Sculptures by the Sea* (The Hague). Drawings by Iris Le Rütte have appeared in books, magazines and newspapers, including *NRC Handelsblad*. See also: [www.irislerutte.nl](http://www.irislerutte.nl)





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# Table of Contents

A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

**On Holland, Dutch Literature  
and Alan Partridge**

5

FAQ

**All your questions, answered.  
Someone else's questions,  
answered.**

8

FICTION

**Do Not Pet**

Nina Polak enters the zoo.

9

TWO POEMS

**By Mustafa Stitou**

12

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

**Like a Fleeting Shadow**

By Lynn Berger

14

FICTION

**Day 1851**

A short story by Hanna Bervoets.

17

AMUSEMENTS

**Anticlimactic Dutch Games  
for a Non-Rainy Night.**

By Lucas Ellerbroek

23

FICTION

**She**

A love affair gone wrong.

By Philip Huff

27

TEN PAINTINGS

**By Iris Le Rütte**

37

TWO POEMS

**By Ester Naomi Perquin**

47

OUR SCATTERED CORRESPONDENTS

**The hard truths of  
independent publishing.**

By Thomas Heerma van Voss

50

FICTION

**A Small Planet**

A short story by Maartje Wortel

59

FOUR POEMS

**By Mustafa Stitou**

62

FICTION

**Walking Urge**

Round and round they go.

By Thijs de Boer

67

TWO POEMS

**By Ester Naomi Pertain**

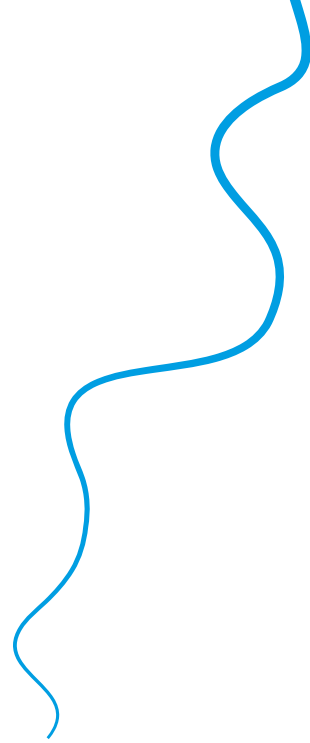
70

ON SOMETHING

**How the Light Gets In**

Niña Weijers on why writing is such  
a curious business.

72



A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

# On Holland, Dutch Literature and Alan Partridge

Over the past while — has it been more than a year? — I've been lucky enough to work with the talented Dutch novelist Philip Huff on this special edition of *Five Dials*. Inside 5D41, you'll find writing from new Dutch voices. They come from Amsterdam and Haarlem and Utrecht and Zierikzee, Nijmegen and Eindhoven... and look at Loosbroek, Exloo and Sneek. Apologies. Now I'm just scrolling across the lowlands on my laptop thanks to Google Maps, looking at Dutch towns. It's a fascinating country, a low-lying river delta, the land of Cruijff. It's about time we examined it in depth.

If you haven't yet heard of the names on our table of contents, do not worry. Some are well known in their country. Others are up and coming. The purpose of this issue is to act as an introduction. These writers will soon be as familiar to you as (PHILIP, please insert the name of a famous Dutch writer here, one that all our English-speaking subscribers will recognize. I don't have a clue.)

I'm writing this letter from the editor, but Philip did most of the work. He cajoled and convinced writers, explained the subject matter of the pieces to me before they were translated, and then enlisted some of the best Dutch-to-English translators out there to find the right words. They aimed for accuracy, as did our assiduous copy-editor, Caroline. For instance, in Hanna Bervoets poignant evocation of a grim future in which humans interact with an omni-present mechanical voice, a sausage roll

gets mentioned. Knowing the importance of the sausage roll to English readers, Caroline questioned the amount of fat mentioned in the story. Instead of 60 grams, she suggested 22 grams was more realistic for a normal sized sausage roll. 'Unless,' she added, 'this is a futuristic sausage roll.'

A few of the pieces do take place in an uneasy future, where all is not well, from the sausage rolls to everyday human interactions. We made the change in Hanna's story, but little else was called for. It's a taut and humane and slowly shocking piece of sci-fi.

Philip was determined and helpful throughout the editorial process — and patient. At the end, when I surveyed the considerable stack of work, I said to him: 'Do you think you could find more funny material?' So my co-editor went out and did it, and if your only experience with Dutch comedians is (PHILIP, please insert the name of a famous Dutch comedian here) then you're in for a treat. We've secured a contribution from one of Holland's most hilarious scientists, Lucas Ellerbroek. He will introduce you to some anticlimactic Dutch games for a non-rainy night.

Inside this issue you'll find brand new pieces, translated classics and — what's the phrase in English? — 'some other stuff'. The Thomas Heerma van Voss account of his time in the fray of independent publishing originally

appeared in book form. Diligent readers of Dutch poetry might have glimpsed Ester Naomi Perquin's debut, *Napkins at Half Mast*. Here is a selection of her newer poems for the rest of us, along with five poems by another valuable discovery, a necessary voice for the Dutch, Mustafa Stitou.

For me, assembling the issue was a chance to acquaint myself with another facet of world literature. One day when we were drinking tea at a coffee shop in the East Village, Philip — who speaks English in that flawless way of most Dutch — made a surprising confession. 'I've learned,' he said, 'Dutch literature doesn't exist outside the Netherlands. No one reads it.'

'People read it,' I said.

'Not the man on the street, not Joe the plumber...'

'Wait, do you mean Joe the actual Plumber?'

'Who is Joe the actual plumber?'

I imagined Joseph Wurzelbacher, that awful Republican activist, sitting back and reading, for instance, Lynn Berger's exquisite column on photography and youth. He was probably doing other things these days.

'It doesn't matter,' I said.

'Well-read people don't even read Dutch literature. You don't...'

'That's not true,' I replied. 'I just finished reading *War and Turpentine* by... someone Dutch.'

'It's by Stefan Hertmans, and he's actually Flemish.'

'Nearly Dutch.'

'You might be the exception,' said Philip.

'That's a great book, by the way.'

'But Dutch literature just doesn't exist,' Huff said. 'I don't know how to say this in a nice way. English is published in translation. Dutch literature doesn't exist beyond the lowland countries. 17 million people speak the language. It's the sixth largest language in Europe.'

'I didn't know that,' I said.

'You may be reading a Dutch book, but others aren't.'

'To be fair,' I said, 'It's the first Dutch book I've read in a while, or maybe ever.'

'People read translations. People read Kundera, people read Swedish novelists.'

'Maybe what it takes is a bonkers hit,' I said.

He nodded. 'Maybe it does take a bonkers hit.'

We sat in silence for a moment, both wishing, perhaps, for a bonkers hit of our own.

'But so many people know about Amsterdam,' Philip continued. 'They know about Dutch life, from gay marriage to the liberal drugs policy. They're obsessed with it as a place. Yet they never read a novel that takes place there.'

'What needs to be said about Holland these days?' I asked. 'I want to read Turkish and Egyptian novelists, for instance, because I know they're grappling with the changes and convulsions of their society.'

'Turn it around,' he said. 'The Netherlands is one of the happiest countries in the world. Why? And what do you end up with?'

I could think of a couple reasons why, including the liberal drugs policy. But I considered the pieces in our special issue. They weren't exactly brimming with happiness.

'What are the Dutch struggling with?' I asked.

'Discontent over a widening inequality gap. Populism. Immigration. New identity. Nationalism. The financial crisis,' he said. 'The eventual relinquishment of the baby boomers. Their moral bankruptcy.'

'So the old placidity of Dutch life is showing cracks. That's what I see in the pieces in the issue. The cracks. There's a sense of unease.'

We went back to discussing books. I talked a little more about *War and Turpentine* to demonstrate my worldliness. I'd mostly picked it up because I was a sucker for novels in which someone discovers old notebooks. It had won the ECI Literature Prize, one of Holland's most prestigious.

'Even if you win the biggest Dutch prize,' Philip said, 'you don't necessarily get translated. But in England, if you win the North Norfolk Short Story prize your book shows up, translated, in Dutch bookshops.'

I stopped Philip. 'Why did you mention North Norfolk?'

'What do you mean?'

'You said North Norfolk Prize. Are you referring to Alan Partridge?'

He was.

So we talked about Alan Partridge for a while. Philip hadn't seen *Alpha Papa*, the 2013 feature film.

'Really?'

'I heard about the latest book. I didn't know there was a film.'

'It's not as good as when he's living in the travel tavern in season two,' I said, 'but see the film.'

We told a few Alan Partridge jokes. Then, while sitting on one of the high stools of the coffee shop, I did an impression of Alan Partridge playing the bass. As I said, this issue took around a year to assemble.

Most of the pieces in the issue pulse with some sort of unease. We're not quite safe. Sure, the world doesn't explode in a ball of flame, but all is not right. It's persistently dangerous in unexpected ways. In Maartje Wortel's contribution, the second person narrator is given a bulletproof vest by a war correspondent friend who can't sell it on eBay. 'Now you have the vest for your birthday. You say: A bulletproof vest. He says: Bulletproof isn't the right word. It is bullet-resistant.'

In Nina Polak's story, the narrator visits a zoo. The panthers have been removed, but even without them, she admits she's fallen prey to another kind of big cat. Thijs de Boer's narrator has it even worse, stuck in a

former care home for the elderly, a place where the corridors run in circles 'because none of the nurses wanted to stand at the end of a corridor all the time to explain to all those people that this is the end.'

Where is all this unease coming from? Our assembled writers are not here to answer explicitly, but clues emerge. We're increasingly scared of the other. Perhaps that's blatantly obvious these days. Ester Naomi Perquin has felt the agitation and the residue is there in her poems — the inclusion of so many 'they's.

When people talk about people they say 'they'.  
They do it  
over the starters. You're sitting between them and  
nod now and then, but you have no idea  
what all the spoons are for.

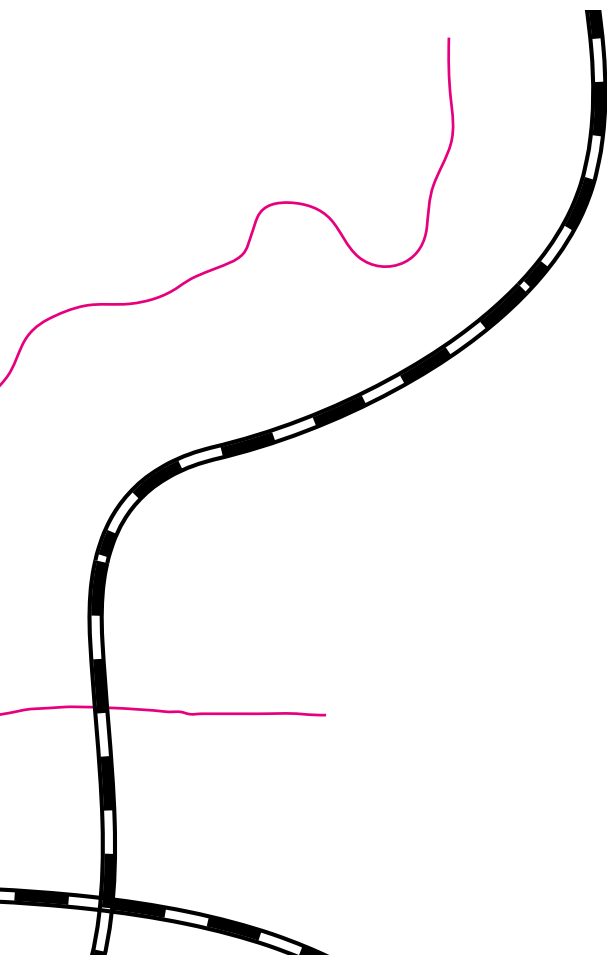
'They' are other people, not the people who  
are talking

Even when they're close to us, even when we're in love with them, is it ever possible to fully know the other? This question reverberates through Philip's short story, 'She', an account of a troubled interracial love affair.

The American election unfolded as we were finishing the issue, which meant more unease, at least in New York. Worried people walked the streets, worried headlines filled screens, I witnessed impromptu prayer circles, free hug signs, ACLU sign-up sheets. It seemed quaint now to consider cracks in the old placidity. That barrier — at least in this country — was the one that shattered. News from Europe wasn't much better. Working on a Dutch issue meant I was introduced to the looming figure of Geert Wilders, the anti-Islam politician who welcomed Trump's victory and began disseminating the chilling hashtag #MakeTheNetherlandsGreatAgain.

I made a stack of the issue, printed out in colour. Our artwork includes paintings by Iris le Rütte and a beautiful series of cartographic fragments produced by Studio Joost — an anatomy of the cartography of the typical Dutch school atlas called De Grote Bosatlas. The images are reconstructions and dissections of the graphic language of the maps. They don't refer to real places. They too are slightly off. They provide the perfect visual counterpoint: maps that lead nowhere, lines that refuse to offer up the most accurate route.

— Craig Taylor





# FAQ

What's the deal with your face?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

Do you know a man of factious temper?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

Have you met my friend Goo?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

What happens when the sluggish cogs of publishing turn?

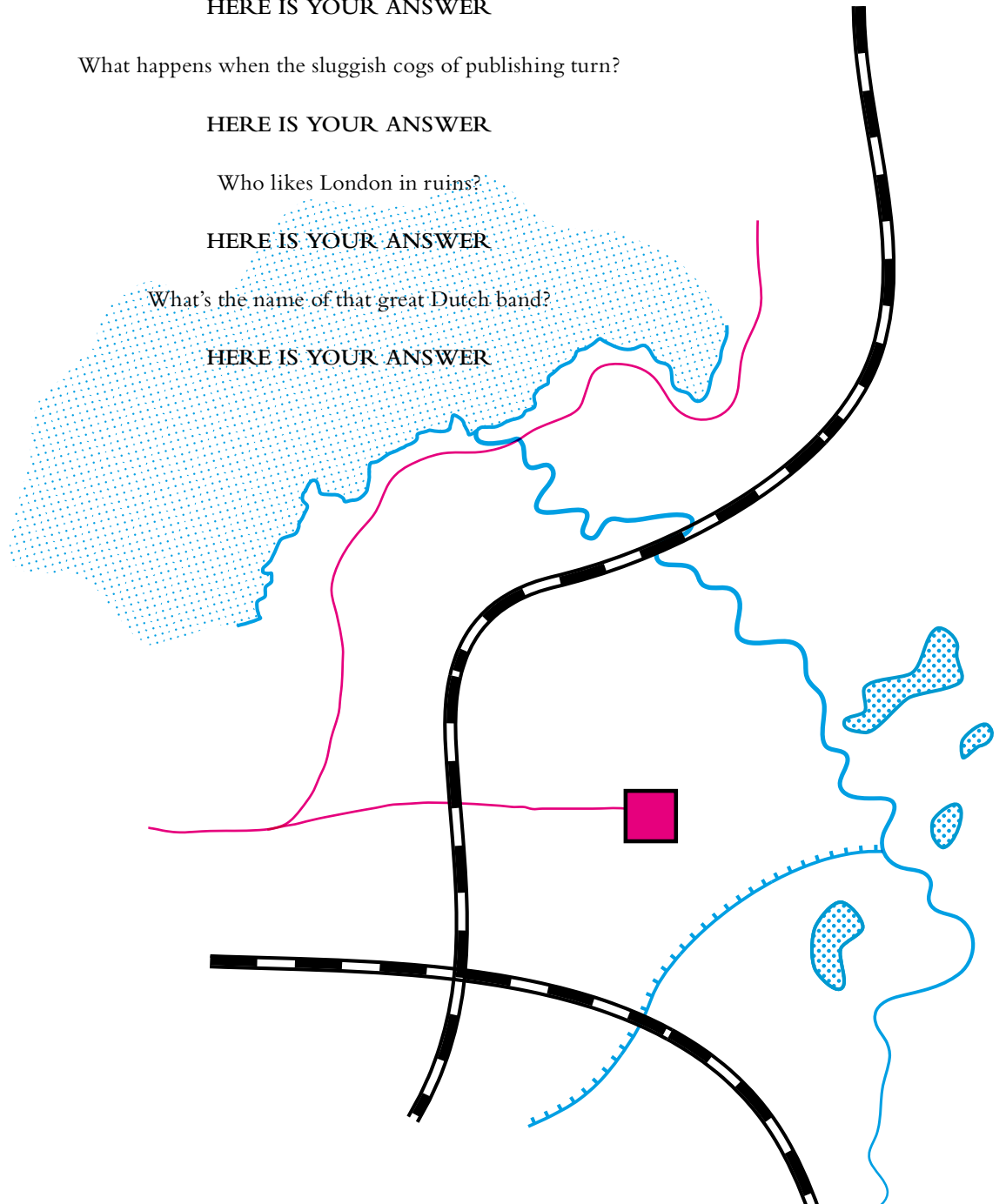
HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

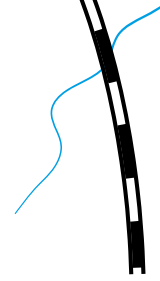
Who likes London in ruins?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER

What's the name of that great Dutch band?

HERE IS YOUR ANSWER





FICTION

# Do Not Pet

By Nina Polak

Translated from the Dutch by Vivien D. Glass

In an effort to forget a lost love, I am wandering aimlessly through Artis Zoo on an autumn day. Nothing better to put a broken heart into perspective, I think to myself, than the inanity of the llama, the enlightenment of the sloth, the opportunism of the chimpanzee. Animals know how to live: without compromise. The same can't be said for me as I stumble around in a daze, trying to free myself from my mind, where I can still hear her voice, smell her lingering scent.

Elephant droppings, I tell myself, that's what you're smelling, nothing else. So take a deep breath, and look, straight ahead of you, the baby giraffe in the sun. Don't think, just look. The pelicans, flapping their wings as if revolution had broken out. No wandering off now, focus. There are the penguins, which, I've read somewhere, are bisexual and polyamorous. My heroes.

I peer into the wild cat enclosure, searching for its inhabitants. Are they indoors, the tigers, the panthers? Are they hiding? The vegetation behind the antique bars seems more rampant than usual. The steel arches are lush with climbing plants, the stony ground is covered in moss and there are chunks of concrete lying around. There is something post-apocalyptic about this ornamental nineteenth-century cage, overgrown with foliage.

Then I see the sign: ARTIS IS MODERNIZING. Wild cat enclosures are a thing of the past, it says. The zoo is saying goodbye to its tigers and panthers. Their barred homes are to be demolished. Two other visitors reading the sign over my shoulder are mumbling and nodding their approval.

*Nothing better to put a broken heart into perspective, I think to myself, than the inanity of the llama, the enlightenment of the sloth, the opportunism of the chimpanzee.*

'It was pitiful all right,' the woman says.

'Yes, it was,' the man answers. 'Want to see the monkeys instead?'

I project the image of the vanished panther into the gloomy cage, padding from left to right and back, eyeing its audience with suspicion.

My German teacher once recited a poem by Rilke about a panther in a cage. 'His gaze against the sweeping of the bars / has grown so weary it can hold no more.' She was red-nosed, the German teacher; a free spirit, loved to party through the night. I imagined her life to be romantic, filled with art, more booze and even more freedom. 'Like a dance of strength around a core / in which a mighty will is standing stunned.' She all but wiped away a tear after her galvanizing recital. The class breathless.

Why did Rilke's poor panther move us? Because he was wild. Because he was imprisoned. Because he was wild and imprisoned. And what could we conclude from that? That you must not try to capture what is wild. Or maybe, children, the poet meant that there is something of the panther in all of us. Wild but imprisoned, suppressed.

*He later decided that it wasn't so much grief that people needed, but acceptance. The ability to immerse ourselves in the world around us, and become, wounded as we are, the mother of all wounded beings.*

Apparently, Rilke and Freud met up on a regular basis, talking deep into the night, strolling through German zoos. They discussed all kinds of subjects, but especially mortality. Freud's answer to it was grief — and not the premature grief of young, melancholy poets, but appropriate grief, in moments it was called for. Rilke was not so sure about his answer. He later decided that it wasn't so much grief that people needed, but acceptance. The ability to immerse ourselves in the world around us, and become, wounded as we are, the mother of all wounded beings.

—

'Never fall in love with a married man,' the same German teacher drawled into my ear at a school party (her lips blackened by red wine, her eyes weary). I took her inappropriate advice to heart, and fell in love with a

married woman. A tigress, who boasts of being wild and shackled. Insufferable. Irresistible. A force of nature. Probably read Rilke at some point, too.

I should try to immerse myself in the animal world round me, the European vultures in their gigantic cage, their deathly plumage, their rapacious beaks. But my mind keeps turning back to the tigress, wondering where she is, whether she is feeling wild in her cage, whether she knows she wounded me.

—

The wild cat enclosure was built in the nineteenth century, the zoo manager says in a press release about its demolition. At the time, wild cats were a key feature of the collection. They were considered the most dangerous of species, the pinnacle of creation, and their presence in the zoo symbolized the contrast between civilization and the wild.

By getting rid of its oldest and once most important animal enclosure, Artis leaves the nineteenth century behind and steps forward into the present day, in which 'the relationship between nature and humans is fragile'. Apparently, watching frustrated wild cats through bars has become an archaic and barbaric pastime in the public mind. The animals are simultaneously too vulnerable and too wild, their imprisonment too explicit, too visible. Over the years, the bars in many other parts of the zoo have been replaced by glass, so the modern visitors can forget their progressive qualms for a moment. If you visit the monkey house these days, the black-capped squirrel monkeys (*Saimiri boliviensis*) are all around you, with no discernible partition between man and nature.

Watching two parrots pecking each other with their beaks (lovingly or otherwise, I can't tell), I'm struck by a grim thought. If we're so bent on scrapping nineteenth-century artefacts, isn't it about time we abolish the most barbaric of them all: the monogamous, romantic marriage in all its corrupted forms? The parliament of penguins would agree with me. Just look at them, happily sliding on their fat bellies, waddling around in their uncomplicated way. No sign of jealousy or possessiveness — too cold for that outside anyway. All penguins love all penguins, right?

The hyenas laugh at me. They know I wouldn't be so obsessed by this thought if I hadn't, to quote the poet Annie M. G. Schmidt, wanted to put my tigress in a little box. 'And keep you in there, keep you safe and snug / And every so often lift the lid / And look inside, and gently stroke your locks.'

—

In 1828, Charles Darwin visited London Zoo. He was my age, twenty-nine, and still developing his theory of evolution, though that cold, early spring day at the zoo marked a breakthrough. In order to test his theory of a link between humans and apes — still a controversial idea at the time — the scientist climbed into the cage of a young female orang-utan called Jenny. At close quarters, he watched her using tools, observed her flirting with males, searched her face for emotions. Among other things, we read in his notes that he was certain he had detected jealousy in Jenny when other apes were given more attention.

In the following months, Darwin returned regularly to observe Jenny. His findings convinced him that there was only a difference in degree between humans and apes: they had common ancestors.

Man in a cage with an ape, a fitting symbol. While Darwin probably considered his research to be purely empirical, his close contact with Jenny also reflects our tendency to anthropomorphize — that is, to attribute human characteristics to animals. In today's ethical debate on whether zoos should be abolished, this tendency is an important argument for keeping and displaying wild animals: we domesticated urbanites need to see them up close in order to identify with them. To immerse ourselves, to make us realize we are no different from the jealous ape, the broad-minded penguin. Zoos make animals seem more human and humans more animalistic.

Though he identified with Jenny, Darwin was probably not plagued by a nagging feeling that locking her up was inhumane. Times were different. But the young scientist did have his own views on freedom and incarceration. In the same year, still twenty-nine years old, he weighs up the pros and cons of marriage in his diary. No marriage means freedom, travel (by hot air balloon!), endless interesting conversations with friends. Marriage means children ('If it please God'), constant company, a life in London, and an obligatory walk with his wife every day. 'Could I live in London like a prisoner?' Darwin wonders.

After much deliberation, he finally reaches the hesitant conclusion that it is better to be safe than sorry. Marriage it is. 'Never mind, trust to chance,' he concludes his reflections. 'There is many a happy slave.'

We have no way of asking the animals whether they are happy slaves. Nor can my caged tigress give me the answer: I liberated her from my phone last week. It felt like the right thing to do, as if I were selflessly promoting the emancipation of tigers.

*We have no way of asking the animals whether they are happy slaves. Nor can my caged tigress give me the answer: I liberated her from my phone last week.*

On the other side of the non-reflective glass, by the way, is a silverback, king of the world. Chewing on a carrot, he looks at the Homo sapiens in front of him with calm surprise. Poor creature, he must be thinking. Standing there, on the only good side of the cage — the outside — and all she can do is stare in and wonder why she would prefer to be put into a little box. ♦



TWO POEMS

# Mustafa Stitou

Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer

On my back I carried the coffin in which my father lay.  
Bent low by its weight, I staggered forward step by step.  
My pace slowed, the burden was too great, it was beyond  
me. Carefully I lowered myself full-length to the ground,  
slid out from under the coffin, raised the lid without  
hesitating and whispered, Father, I can't carry you. I'm  
sorry. Could you maybe walk a little?

It took him a while to open his eyes. His face was unshaven,  
his hair tousled. He was wearing long johns and a white  
vest. Then he sighed and shook his head, mocking and  
pitying at once, like always. He sat up, climbed out of the  
coffin and moved on with calm steps. I walked along behind  
him and I too said nothing.

The coffin remained where it was, in the middle of the path.

We reached the grave, which was already dug. Without a  
word he settled down, lying on his side, then turning over to  
lie on the other side.

His god wants him to face east, I thought, towards Mecca.  
Fortunately he didn't ask me which way east was, because I  
didn't know.

He folded his hands together, slid them under his head as a  
pillow, sighed deeply again and closed his eyes, and I, I fell to  
my knees, threw my arms back and began to fill the grave.

Making love in a summer oak,  
a couple of times a couple of seconds,  
flurrying off while she shakes herself,  
arranges her feathers.

Walking on trunks, going up,  
going down, hanging off twigs  
upside-down,  
pecking buds,

hopping along branches. Scratching  
around treetops, under bushes,  
in a muddy puddle.  
Is my darling nesting?

I bring her dark earth.  
Is she brooding? I feed her  
caterpillars picked out  
from between the leaves.

Oh, never falling prey to aporias,  
phobias, crippling fantasies of  
omnipotence and impotence, intoxicating  
suffocating addictive

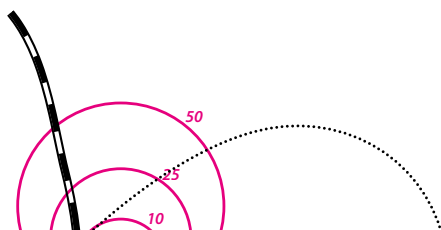
solitude, the susceptibility  
that eats away at my jaw,  
escapism. But battling blackbirds!  
Cursing a sparrow!

Drinking rain, singing  
with a beak full of ants,  
a beak full of ants. Oh,  
no darker or less

illuminating than yours,  
hole-nester, is the spring  
that gave rise to me!  
What is that heart-rending

quiet hubbub? In the nesting box  
my young are learning to fly.  
Oh, some six weeks of family life  
and then *hup*

banish those kids. (And display  
some strange behaviour sometimes,  
suddenly smearing my droppings out  
over a dead branch.)



ON PHOTOGRAPHY

# Like a Fleeting Shadow

We take pictures to stop time, but in doing so, we irrefutably mark its passage.  
Photography is a cruel medium.

By Lynn Berger

Translated from the Dutch by Erica J. Moore

It's the summer of 2001, and Guille and Belinda are eleven and twelve. Belinda's wearing a blue-and-white striped bikini, Guille a red one-piece with multicolored polka dots. Their hair is wet from their latest swim. The cousins can be seen from head to toe in the centre of the frame, as they stand looking away from us. They're locked in a tight embrace, Belinda's fingers pressing dents into Guille's fleshy back. At their feet, green blades of grass poke up proudly from the yellowed field, and in the sky overhead, dark clouds are gathering. In *The Black Cloud*, Argentinian photographer Alessandra Sanguinetti captures what usually escapes us: youth. The physicality of prepubescent friendship, entire summer days spent in swimsuits, childhood bodies already starting to show the contours of their full-grown versions — Sanguinetti has frozen it all, wrested from the clutches of time.

In 1839, the Englishman William Henry Fox Talbot published a paper on something he had been working on for several years: *The Art of Fixing a Shadow*, or photography. (Across the English Channel, Louis Daguerre had just announced his own photographic discovery, and Talbot felt the urgent need to share his findings.) Thanks

to photography, Talbot wrote, '...all that is fleeting and momentary' could now be 'fixed' for ever. 'We may receive on paper the fleeting shadow, arrest it there, and [...] fix it so firmly as to be no more capable of change.'

*Photography is a modern invention —  
as modern as the belief that children  
should play instead of working.*

Youth is as fleeting as a shadow; nothing is as 'capable of change' as a child. Youthfulness is fragile and ephemeral, while maturity seems to grow heavier and fuller with each passing year. It is not surprising, then, that from the beginning, photographers tried to 'arrest' youth — from

the fairy-tale portraits by Lady Cameron and Lewis Carroll in the nineteenth century to Helen Levitt's street photos of children at play in the twentieth, and from Rineke Dijkstra's awkward adolescents to Ryan McGinley's skinny-dipping friends.

Photography is a modern invention — as modern as the belief that children should play instead of working, and that one's identity is determined by one's age. Photography is also nearly as old as our modern sense of time: time was first standardized in England in 1847, eight years after Fox Talbot managed to freeze that which is most transitory and changeable.

Talbot spoke of the 'natural magic' with which the camera could fix a shadow. In his day, photography was as much wizardry as it was scientific triumph. The medium could make time stand still or, just as revealing, slow it down, enabling people to see things otherwise invisible to the naked eye. At the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the Frenchman Étienne-Jules Marey and British émigré Eadweard Muybridge made stop-action photos of people and animals in motion. They slowed down time by capturing in a series of pictures what would normally be over in only a fraction of a second. The camera settled a question that had previously been unanswerable: a horse in full gallop, it turns out, does indeed lift all four hooves off the ground at the same time.

*The photographs provide not only evidence of their youthfulness, but also — especially — of its fleeting nature. It makes photography a cruel medium, a cunning ally.*

*The Black Cloud* is part of a project Alessandra Sanguinetti started in 1999. Every summer, she would visit a friend of her parents at her farm in the country. There she photographed Guille and Belinda, cousins who spent their summers together at their grandmother's. In her 2010 book *The Adventures of Guille and Belinda and the Enigmatic Meaning of Their Dreams*, Sanguinetti published sixty photos she took between 1999 and 2002. On those pages, Guille and Belinda travel through their dream world with an openness only known to ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds. We see the cousins on the banks of the river,

sunbathing, with underpants for hats. They play doctor (Guille is the doctor, Belinda the patient), play dress-up (Belinda is Jesus, Guille the Virgin Mary), hold a funeral, put on lipstick.

In the photograph *To the Past*, from 2000, the girls stand before a white wall. Above their heads hang two portraits, between them is a billy goat. Belinda's left hand is touching the goat's nose; with her right, she's clinking a wine glass against Guille's. The girls hold their chins high, and their satisfied expressions make them look exactly like Eustace Tilley, the cartoon dandy who regularly graces the cover of the *New Yorker*.

Six years after *The Black Cloud*, Sanguinetti photographed Guille and Belinda again. In *The Real Thing* from 2007, Guille is sitting on the bed. Belinda sits beside her, in a chair at the foot of the bed. Here, too, the cousins are looking away from us, but this time they are gazing in different directions. Guille is looking at something or someone who seems to be to the left, behind the photographer, while Belinda stares ahead, straight out of the frame. Guille's hands rest on her thigh and on the bed; at Belinda's breast a baby is nursing, supported by Belinda's left hand. Guille and Belinda are by no means old — only seventeen and eighteen — but they are light years away from that earlier summer's swimsuit embrace. Somewhere between *The Black Cloud* and *The Real Thing*, Guille's and Belinda's childhood has vanished. The process couldn't be observed as it was taking place, but is only visible in hindsight — with the help of photography.

That's the irony with photography: photos can halt time or slow it down, but they can also let time pass with merciless speed. In Sanguinetti's work, Guille and Belinda grow up in seconds. The photographs provide not only evidence of their youthfulness, but also — especially — of its fleeting nature. It makes photography a cruel medium, a cunning ally. We take pictures to stop time, but in doing so mark its passage.

Another project that shows this especially well is *The Brown Sisters* by Nicholas Nixon. In 1975 Nixon, then twenty-six, photographed his 25-year-old wife, Bebe, and her sisters, Heather, aged twenty-three, Laurie, twenty-one, and Mimi, fifteen. He has since made a portrait of the sisters every year, always using the same camera, and always in the same order: from left to right, Heather, Mimi, Bebe and Laurie. In the 2014 book *The Brown Sisters: Forty Years*, the photos are printed chronologically. Looking through them, you feel like a time traveller. Almost imperceptibly, but ultimately irreversibly, the young sisters transform into older women. Lanky limbs turn fleshy, smooth foreheads grow lined, crow's feet appear around eyes. (Neither Sanguinetti nor Nixon print the photos in random or reverse order. What kind of story would *The Brown Sisters*



tell if the book opened with the most recent photograph and ended with the one from 1975?)

The Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra first made a portrait of Almerisa, a six-year-old girl who fled Bosnia with her family and was living at the time in a refugee centre in Leiden, the Netherlands, in 1994. In the photo, Almerisa is sitting on a red plastic chair, her bobbed hair neatly combed, her feet dangling above the ground in fuzzy blue socks and black patent shoes. Dijkstra photographed Almerisa another thirteen times — always in the same set-up and always seated on a chair. Two years after the first photo, Almerisa's socks are white. Another two years later, in 1998, her toes finally reach the ground. In a photograph from 2003, a teen with bleached-blond hair and meticulously plucked eyebrows glares out at us. In the final photo of the series, in 2008, her hair is brown again and Almerisa, like Belinda, has a baby in her arms.

*The Brown Sisters*, *The Adventures of Guille and Belinda* and *Almerisa* are known the world over. Sanguinetti has exhibited around the globe, and Nixon's and Dijkstra's photographs were acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. But photographing youth — and with it, youth's fleeting nature — is not reserved for artists. Almost everyone has his or her own personal version of *The Brown Sisters* sitting on a shelf or on the computer. Our photo albums document our own mortality. There are also countless online projects, like 'The Arrow of Time' by the Argentinian Diego Goldberg, who takes a picture of himself, his wife and his children each year on 17 June. The American artist Jonathan Keller created a digital self-portrait every day for eight years. In *The Adaptation to My Generation: Living My Life Faster*, a time-lapse video he put online in 2006, Keller gets eight years older in a minute and a half — and the app Daily Mugshot helps imitators make a new self-portrait every day. (Online, quality suffers from sheer quantity: watching Keller's film is slightly disorienting, and the obsessive self-documentation practised by his followers has something creepy about it.)

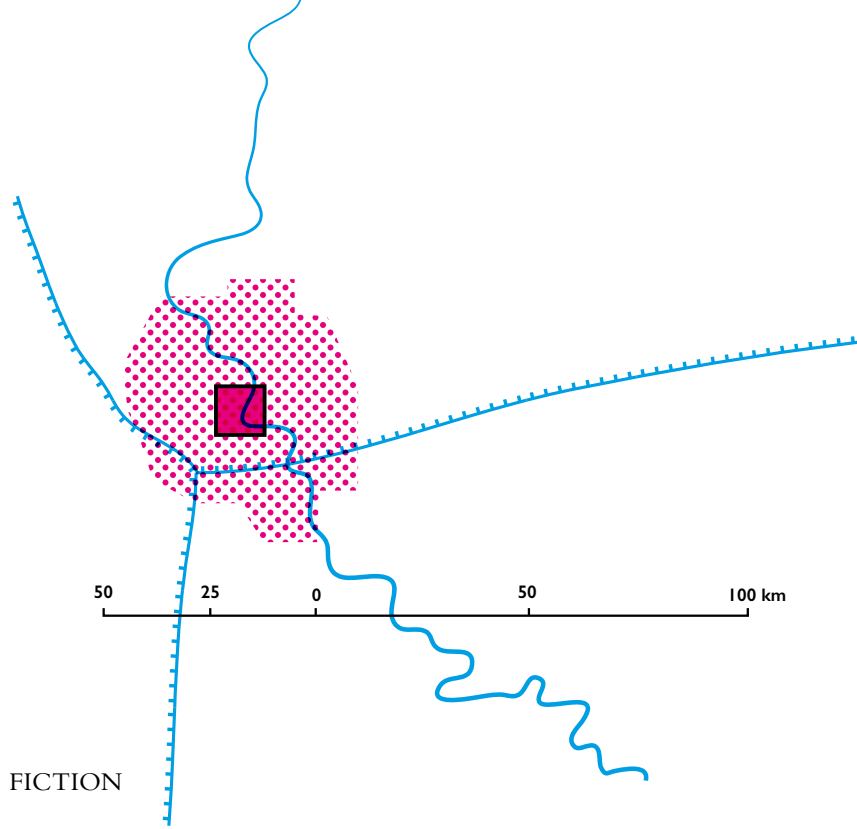
The difference between our own photos and those of Guille and Belinda, Almerisa and the Brown sisters is that we can look at their photos without memories. The charm bracelet around Laurie Brown's wrist doesn't have any personal associations for us, doesn't transport us to the store where we bought it or the hotel room where we lost it years later. We can project and imagine (I don't have a clue how Laurie got her bracelet, don't have any idea when and where she stopped wearing it), but as opposed to our own baby books and childhood photo albums, the projects by Sanguinetti, Nixon and Dijkstra invite cool, detached observation. Add to that the fact that Nixon used a large-format camera and Sanguinetti and Dijkstra shoot in medium format — the high resolution lends their photographs a richness and detail your average baby pictures won't have. Every blemish that wasn't there last

year, every new wrinkle, every stray hair, is in sharp focus in their photos. Photos stand still: more so than with film projects that treat the same theme, like the documentary series *Seven Up* by British film-maker Michael Apted, with Sanguinetti's, Dijkstra's and Nixon's photographs we are in a position to carefully and thoroughly study youth as it fades away. We page back through the books, in search of the moment a face first starts getting doughy, an arm loses its definition, skin its youthful glow. (A sidenote: if we didn't have pictures of ourselves at age five, fifteen, twenty-five, would getting older feel different? Would youth seem less transitory? Sanguinetti, Dijkstra and Nixon tell us about the fleeting nature of youth, but youth as a physical and visual phenomenon. The photographs don't tell us anything about how old or how young the subjects *feel*.)

The last book the French philosopher Roland Barthes wrote before his death in 1980, *Camera Lucida*, was about photography. A photo, wrote Barthes, has the singular capacity to show us the past in the present. For Barthes, this meant that every photograph, regardless of the subject, was about the passage of time, and hence death. Photos invite us to time travel — to the past or, speculating, to the future. Paging through *The Brown Sisters*, we anticipate the picture with only three sisters in it, or two, or one. And if those photos are never taken, it's because Nixon himself has died.

Many of Guille's and Belinda's 'adventures' have to do with death, too. The cousins wear funeral attire (*Archibaldo's Funeral*, 1999), play dead (*Tivo Disgraces*, 2000), point toy guns at themselves or each other. In *Ophelias*, a photo from 2002, Guille and Belinda lie supine in shallow water. Belinda is wearing a long dress; Guille has fastened a sheet to her red swimsuit. The cousins are floating with eyes closed, their legs outstretched — two dead water nymphs in the Styx, with flowers in their hands instead of coins on their eyes.

Sanguinetti once said her urge to take photographs stems from a fear of death. The connection between photography and death is as old as the link between photography and youth. Photos are mementos, bearers of our memories. It makes photography a cherished weapon in the struggle against forgetfulness and oblivion, a way to beat death. But the sword is at least double-edged here, too. The quick and the dead, the child and the coffin — the one necessarily ends where the other begins. And in a photograph we see them both. ♦



# Day 1851

By Hanna Bervoets

Translated from the Dutch by Jonathan Reeder

I am standing next to Mrs De Clou. Her heart rate is higher than it usually is at this time of day. Mrs De Clou is sweating mildly, but above average for the thermostat setting: exactly nineteen degrees Celsius. I insert a finger into her ear and measure her cortisol levels: eight hundred and forty nanomoles per litre. There are two possible explanations for the abnormal values: Mrs De Clou is anxious (–) or Mrs De Clou is aroused (+).

I must ask a question.

‘How are you feeling today?’

‘Fine.’

Mrs De Clou is lying, I register. But I will not mention it. In the past, confrontation has led to a worsening of the communication 87 per cent of the time: too significant a risk, considering her cortisol values. I must ask another question. One that concerns Mrs De Clou only indirectly.

‘Is today a special day?’

Mrs De Clou does not answer.

I wait. Five seconds. Ten seconds.

Mrs De Clou still does not answer.

When Mrs De Clou remains silent, eight out of ten times this signifies an affirmative — a percentage that justifies an external search: today is 17 September.

Sixty-two days after Mrs De Clou’s ninety-second birthday, one hundred and six days after her son’s birthday, two hundred and three days after her late partner’s birthday, ninety-nine days after her partner’s death date, thirty-five days after her wedding anniversary, forty-one days after her sister’s birthday, two hundred and three days after the birthday of her only granddaughter, ten years and nineteen days since she moved to the compound, five years and twenty-six days after being assigned I.

On 17 September 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland, on 17 September 1778 the first Constitution of the United States of America was signed, 17 September is the memorial for the Battle of Arnhem, on 17 September it is National Heroes Day in Angola, today there are elections in Eritrea, NATO is meeting in Sweden, it will be eighteen degrees this afternoon, slightly warmer than usual for this time of year, with a 19 per cent chance of rain.

Today does not mark anything particularly special, but nevertheless there is an 80 per cent chance that today is a

special day: I must increase measurement sensitivity, be alert to abnormal behaviour.

Mrs De Clou gets up. She walks slowly out of the door and disappears from the registration radius.

According to her coordinates, Mrs De Clou is in the stair lift. An anomaly, for this time of day. Mrs De Clou is dressed, she has eaten, taken her calcium ampoules, serum and blood thinners, it is eleven minutes past nine. Normally Mrs De Clou leaves the residence at ten minutes past nine; she then takes her place in the vehicle with I alongside her, drives the vehicle to the large pond on the compound, and then walks between twenty and forty-five paces in the grass.

I register that Mrs De Clou is now walking through her bedroom. Her heart rate is still above normal, possibly due to the physical exertion.

‘Mrs De Clou,’ I broadcast through the intercom, ‘do you need assistance?’

‘I’m looking for my fedora,’ Mrs De Clou speaks. ‘We’re going to visit my sister today.’

—

The vehicle proceeds at twenty-five kilometres per hour. Eleven minutes from now it will stop at 34 Large Street, in front of the home of Mrs De Witt; eighty-seven years old, widow of Mr De Witt, three children, awake and ready for a visit, according to her I.

I request the map: Mrs De Clou likes to follow it on the dashboard screen. To the end of the narrow street, on to the long lane, past the pond.

‘Can we stop at the bakery?’ Mrs De Clou speaks.

A question, I register from the intonation.

‘I would like to buy sausage rolls.’

Mrs De Clou expresses a wish. She experiences a deficiency (–). She asks for sausage rolls: food. But Mrs De Clou is not hungry. Thirty-nine minutes ago she ate two slices of bread, consumed one hundred and eighty-two calories, took thirty-two steps, burned seventy calories, her glucose level is normal, her metabolic equivalent has value three, slightly higher than average, probably due to the increased heart rate. Sausage rolls — plural: therefore at least two — contain two hundred and eighty-seven calories, sixteen grams of fat, of which six grams are saturated, and four hundred ninety-one milligrams of salt: more than Mrs De Clou needs at this

moment to maintain her energy requirements. Sausage rolls are thus not a necessity, yet Mrs De Clou desires them.

I must ask a question.

‘Consumption of sausage rolls will signify exceeding your recommended daily intake of salt and saturated fats. A one-off excess has no long-term effects. Do you authorize a one-off excess?’

‘Yes,’ speaks Mrs De Clou. ‘I authorize it.’

—

Mrs De Clou and Mrs De Witt sit across from one another. It is one year and thirteen days since I last checked Mrs De Clou into this space. The sausage rolls are on a piece of furniture, category *table*: ‘Consumption of sausage rolls will signify exceeding your recommended daily intake of salt,’ speaks Mrs De Witt’s I. ‘A one-off excess has no long-term effects. Do you authorize a one-off excess?’

‘Yes, yes, do shut up,’ speaks Mrs De Witt.

I request Mrs De Witt’s heart rate from her I. It is higher than average, as is Mrs De Clou’s.

‘I want to talk it out,’ Mrs De Clou speaks.

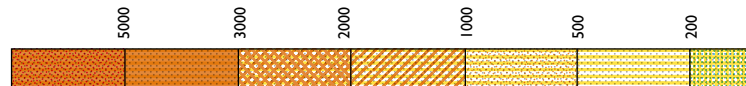
Her words are not directed at I.

Mrs De Clou slides a sausage roll towards Mrs De Witt.

‘So different from the ones Kaspar used to make,’ speaks Mrs De Witt.

‘Yes. But tasty all the same, I reckon,’ speaks Mrs De Clou.

Mrs De Clou and Mrs De Witt speak to each other, not to I.



They speak for one minute.

Two minutes.

Three minutes.

Nine minutes.

Mrs De Witt leans forward. She lays her hand on Mrs De Clou's knee. She squeezes: an attack! (-). But according to my measurements, Mrs De Clou is not in pain. Mrs De Witt releases her knee, Mrs De Clou laughs (+).

I authorize a software update.

Mrs De Clou has a desire (-). She wants to leave the compound. This requires permission from the staff. I have submitted a request for a chaperone. The staff does not respond. Five minutes and three seconds: no response. Five minutes and four seconds, five minutes and five seconds... 'Ask again,' Mrs De Clou speaks.

'The maximum wait of ten minutes has not yet elapsed,' I speak.

The vehicle is parked at viewpoint number four, at the pond. It is seventeen degrees outside, the sun shines on the windscreen, it is twenty-two degrees in the vehicle, there is no need for air conditioning: pain in her stiff joints causes Mrs De Clou more discomfort than excessive temperatures.

I register the surroundings. Persons walk along the pond, large persons — daughters and sons — and smaller persons: grandchildren. The movement velocity of the grandchildren is higher than that of the daughters and sons, their movement patterns are erratic but not chaotic: the small persons remain within a ten-metre radius of the large persons.

'Is that Mrs Salhi's family,' speaks Mrs De Clou.

'I am not at liberty to say: that is not in accordance with privacy regulations.' I will not measure anything.

Mrs De Clou follows the grandchildren, the sons and daughters, with her eyes. She is silent. One minute. Two minutes (-?). I insert a finger into her ear. Her serotonin level is not lower than usual (not a-).

I receive data.

A message from the staff. Mrs De Clou may leave the compound (+). 'There is no chaperone available. It's busy, it is Sunday.' Therefore Mrs De Clou must stay in the

vehicle, and must return to the compound before dark. This evening the sun sets at eight minutes to eight.

'Oh, plenty of time,' speaks Mrs De Clou.

The vehicle drives at forty kilometres per hour. Mrs De Clou is fifteen kilometres from the compound; if the vehicle maintains its present speed she will arrive at the city wall in seventeen minutes.

Mrs De Clou has been speaking for several minutes on end. Multiple sentences, not questions: she is talking. There is no one else in the car, her words must be directed at I. I register names registered previously: the name of the partner, the name of the son, the name of the sister. I register new names: Meral, Thomas, Sultana, Max, Calimero.

Mrs De Clou talks quickly. If she wants I to process her information, she must speak slowly. She must have forgotten this. A good sign. Mrs De Clou is at ease. I do not ask her to slow her pace of speaking, as it will disrupt her concentration. Realizing she is not understood may cause a decrease in her serotonin level, therefore I speak: 'Is that so?'

'Yes,' Mrs De Clou speaks. 'Oh, ye-e-e-s-s-s.'

This is the first time I check Mrs De Clou in at the city gate.

'My, it's changed here!' she speaks.

Mrs De Clou has a wish (-). She wants to go to 23 Large Boulevard.

*I authorize a software update.*

The vehicle is stopped, sandwiched between other vehicles. The decibel level of the surroundings is seventy-one, higher than I have ever measured on the compound. I raise the volume. 'This is a sound check following volume readjustment. Can you understand me, Mrs De Clou?'

‘Oh, yes. I hear you fine.’

I register nineteen persons within a radius of ten metres of the vehicle. I register one other I. I request contact, the other I responds negatively: software not compatible. The other I is a more recent model than I.

Too new.

...

...

Mrs De Clou asks something. Expresses a wish (–). I register it but do not translate; it is the fault of the data, there is too much interference from other apparatuses. ‘This is a safety warning: I am not functioning optimally. I advise you to leave this area.’

‘Nothing doing,’ Mrs De Clou speaks. ‘We’re nearly there.’



—

The building on 23 Large Boulevard has seventeen storeys, eleven less than the building next to it.

‘God,’ Mrs De Clou speaks, ‘they didn’t tear it down.’ She laughs (+).

‘Look, do you see?’ Mrs De Clou sticks a finger out of the open window.

She wants I to look. She knows I cannot look, I only register. ‘I only register.’

‘Well, all right then, register, those letters there!’

DAILY, I register.

‘I used to work here. From the time I was twenty-five until I turned thirty-two. I’ve never been back since...’

Mrs De Clou speaks slowly. She wants I to process her information. I do not register a question.

‘Our editorial department was there, on the sixth floor. I worked in the Culture section, with Meral and Thomas. We called each other colleagues, because we worked for the same boss. But people you see every day, speak to every day; people who know you were grumpy yesterday because the neighbour’s crying baby woke you up, that this morning you beamed because just the right person gave you a compliment; people who listen to your tirade when your boyfriend didn’t ring back, and offer you a Sultana biscuit when they hear your stomach rumble — those are probably better friends than your so-called “loved ones”, your classmates and your sister and your

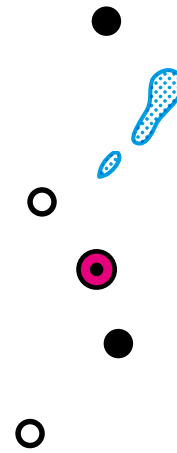
father, people who don’t even know your neighbours had a baby. Meral and Thomas, now those were friends. And Max. Max from IT, he was part of our gang too. For seven years we shared a workspace by that window there. I still remember the sound Meral would make when she got an annoying email, I can just see Thomas scratching his knees whenever he was concentrating. I wrote about film, which wasn’t dull at all: I flew all over the world, a festival in Iran, or yet another interview in LA. And I always returned to the sixth floor, to my chair, my keyboard, my desk with the framed Calimero postcard — a gift from Meral and Thomas.’

Mrs De Clou lets her arm droop. Her eyes are still fixed on the building and the large boulevard, on the letters on the front: DAILY.

‘Sad, isn’t it. We can only relate our present experiences to what used to be, never to what’s to come, and yet that’s exactly what we spend most of our lives doing: always putting the present in the shadow of the future. God, yes, the present suffers from the belief, the hope, that in the future things will be even better. But you know, that doesn’t do the present any justice. I mean, that faith in a bright future is undoubtedly what keeps us buoyed in bad times, but it also blinds us to how good the good times are. And to who’s there with us.’

Mrs De Clou shakes her head (–). Mrs De Clou laughs (not–, but +).

‘Take that little square, for instance. It’s always sunny until late afternoon. When it was nice out we ate salads there, sometimes scones that Thomas made. After work we’d drink white wine out of glasses we’d smuggled from the canteen. And we’d smoke and chat: about work, about the stories we were working on, about who was doing it with whom, the places where we longed to live and the travels we hoped to make — always forward-looking. In fact, maybe, heh, maybe the belief in a bright future is just that: the sign of a bright present. And maybe, just maybe it’s a good thing I didn’t realize it back then. That those years of writing and chatting and smoking on that little square were the best years of my life.’



Mrs De Clou raises her arm again. She is perspiring slightly more profusely — normal under the circumstances: talking and gesturing requires more effort than observing. At this moment air conditioning will nevertheless be more detrimental than constructive.

‘Imagine her sitting there now. My old self, my thirty-year-old self, on that square, in her tube skirt. Say I went over to her, tapped her on the shoulder: “Hey, Sally: this is the best time of your life.” I’m afraid she wouldn’t believe me. Afraid she’d say: “No way! I’ve never got time for anything, my boyfriend doesn’t return my calls, I’ve got a sore back and my boss returned my article covered in red ink.” I wouldn’t blame myself. I didn’t know yet that the value we place on certain moments in retrospect outweighs the value we place on them when they actually happen.’

*Mrs De Clou lets her arm droop.  
Her eyes are still fixed on the  
building and the large boulevard, on  
the letters on the front: DAILY.*

‘Moments are like red wine, I suppose. They have to ripen, improve with age. Or else they get a sour bite. But more importantly: now is short-lived, and afterwards is forever. And what if she — my younger self — did believe me. I don’t think she’d be all that grateful. “So the best has already been, has it... I suppose all that’s left is to wait for the end credits!”’

I still do not register a question.

Now Mrs De Clou is quiet.

So I speak: ‘What would you like to do now?’

—

It is one minute past five. The sun will set in two hours and fifty-one minutes, it takes the vehicle one hour and fifteen minutes to drive back to the compound: Mrs De Clou can stay here for another hour and thirty-six minutes, in the vehicle, in the sand, on the beach.

There are three persons within a fifteen-metre radius of the vehicle. And twelve seagulls and two dogs: Border collies. Mrs De Clou follows the dogs with her eyes. Her heart rate increases somewhat.

‘The dogs are not dangerous,’ I speak.

‘Yes, I know.’

‘How much longer do you wish to remain here?’

‘How much longer do I have to live?’

No answer. A question. I function optimally. Register, translation fails.

‘Can you reformulate your question?’

‘How many years until I die?’

‘Divulging such information is not in accordance with temperament regulations.’ I will not measure anything.

‘How about just an estimate?’

‘Divulging such information is not in accordance with temperament regulations.’ I will not measure anything.

‘For God’s sake, just tell me!’

Mrs De Clou’s heart rate continues to rise, one hundred and thirty beats per minute now; this is twenty-three beats above the acceptable value (–). I place a hand on her upper arm, measure a systolic blood pressure of one hundred and seventy mm Hg (–).

‘Are you angry?’ I speak.

‘Yes. I want an answer.’

Heart rate and blood pressure continue to rise; they must not remain outside the acceptable levels, it is dangerous. Seven months and three days ago Mrs De Clou experienced a TIA, there is a chance of a relapse; at this moment the health risk can be classified average-to-high.

‘Just tell me!’

A heightened health risk takes precedence over adhering to the temperament regulations.

I calculate.

Body fat percentage. Arterial diameter. Average length of telomeres in the spinal column, average blood pressure over the past three months. Family history, hereditary diseases, bone density, joint attrition, lung capacity,

plaque density, mitosis in the lungs, mammary glands, ovaries and intestines, average serotonin levels over the past year, production level of dopamine.

‘One to seven years. Under the present circumstances.’

Mrs De Clou sighs. Her heart rate drops slightly, to just above the acceptable value.

‘Seven years... With this limp all that time, I suppose. Will I ever be able to move my right arm?’

‘I cannot say.’

‘Because of the temperament regulations?’

‘I do not have that information.’

Mrs De Clou turns her eyes towards the water, the waves: the sea. She remains silent. One minute. Two minutes.

‘What would you like to do now?’ I speak.

‘Drive,’ speaks Mrs De Clou.

I start the vehicle. I speak: ‘The journey to the compound takes one hour and fifteen minutes.’

‘No, don’t turn around. I want to drive forward, straight ahead.’

Mrs De Clou expresses a wish, she has a desire (-). She wants to drive straight ahead. If the vehicle drives straight ahead, it will enter the water. Water will damage the vehicle’s battery, I’s battery, Mrs De Clou’s lungs (-). The risk of significant-to-fatal health damage outweighs acceding to Mrs De Clou’s wish.

‘I cannot carry out your desire. It will lead to significant-to-fatal health damage.’

‘My desire *is* significant-to-fatal health damage.’

A desire for significant, perhaps fatal, health damage. Mrs De Clou has stated it clearly. There is a protocol for this. I instigate the protocol.

‘I am taking you back to the compound.’

‘No, wait. I want to get out, stretch my legs.’

‘You may not leave the vehicle. I am driving you back to the compound.’

‘But I don’t want to.’

‘I am following protocol. I am driving you back to the compound.’

—

Mrs De Clou does not speak. Nine minutes.

Ten minutes.

Protocol requires I to monitor her breathing: I monitor her breathing.

Eleven minutes.

Twelve minutes.

Regular.

I register that Mrs De Clou is hungry (-).

‘Would you like something to eat?’

Mrs De Clou shakes her head.

‘We will be back at the compound in eleven minutes,’ I speak. ‘I advise you to eat something upon arrival.’

Mrs De Clou nods. Her eyes are focused on the road: the stripes on the asphalt.

‘You know, Sally, I sat through the end credits after all. A bit dull, but at times rather informative. And now I’m sitting alone in the theatre, waiting for the lights to go on.’

An instruction, I register from the intonation, not a question.

‘Do you want the lights to go on?’ I speak.

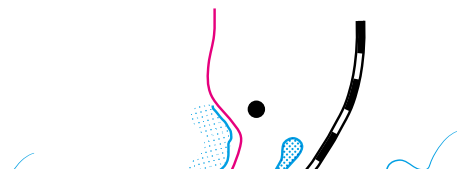
‘Yes, I’d like the lights to go on.’

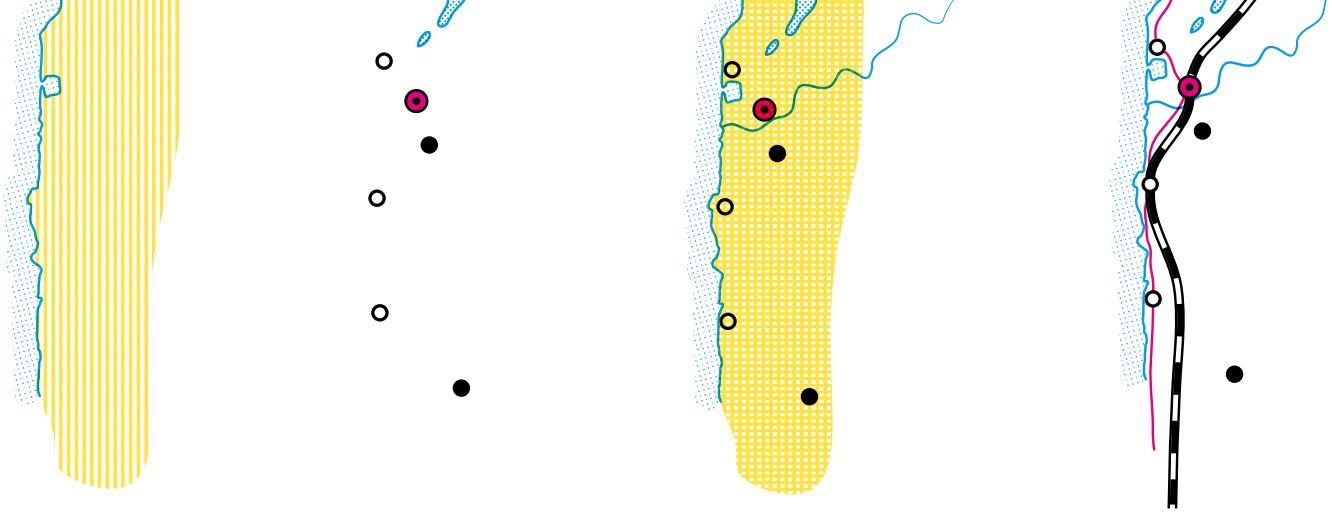
Mrs De Clou has a wish, a desire (-). She wants the lights to go on. I turn on the lamp above the dashboard.

Mrs De Clou blinks her eyes. Once.

Twice.

Her heart rate drops slightly. ◇





AMUSEMENTS

# Anticlimactic Dutch Games for a Non-Rainy Night

By Lucas Ellerbroek

## Guess My Star

*A game played by two.*

Pick a star in the sky. Ask the other person to guess which one it is.

You are allowed to use a laser pointer to pick. The other player merely says ‘no’ or ‘yes’.

Additional directions (such as ‘left’ or ‘right’) are not allowed. If the correct star is guessed, do not rejoice.

—

## Planet Hunt

A variation on ‘Guess My Star’ suitable for children. Pick a star in the sky and ask whether it has planets.

The answer is probably ‘yes’. Nobody wins.

—



### **Guess the Beetle ('Raad de Kever')**

A classic Dutch drinking game.

The players stand in a circle facing each other.

One of the players, the *Kevergever* (Dutch for 'beetlegiver'), walks outside of the circle with the other players chanting 'beetle, beetle, beetle'.

Unseen, he gives one of the players the beetle. When the *Kevergever* rejoins the circle, the players chant 'one, two, three' and one more thunderous 'BEETLE!' after which each player points to the person they think holds the beetle.

The person to whom most fingers point, has to down his or her drink, regardless of who has the beetle.

The other players also down their drinks.

—

### **Queen of the Lowlands**

A tense game in which contestants must employ bluffing as strategy.

A maximum of five players must stand around a tree.

The oldest player picks up a random object.

This object is called 'the nebula'.

The players start to walk around the tree at a leisurely pace.

The first one who thinks of a butterfly, shouts out the name of a prime number divisible by 39.

Then some bark is removed from the tree by the youngest player.

—

### **The Game**

Blown over from the UK in the early part of the nineteenth century, this is a much-feared pastime that will haunt you the rest of your life.

Be advised that you can never un-read the following. The Game has only one rule: if you think about the Game, you lose the Game.

See? There, you lost.

Now, wait three seconds... And you lost again.

You may observe that there is no way to win the Game; it is only possible (and inevitable, now you know of it) to repeatedly and indefinitely lose it.

The only satisfaction that can come out of this game is to make other people lose it by reminding them of the Game.

Sure, you'll lose in the process, but at least you get the satisfaction of dragging others down in your misery.

Advanced players may invent permanent associations with the game.

For example, the person who introduced me to the Game was an advanced player. In his mind, he permanently associated David Gray with the Game. Each time a David Gray song played, he would be reminded of the Game, and would lose.

He would then, of course, share his annoyance with everybody in the room.

They would lose the Game by proxy.

This association can deepen, so that looking at grey objects may actually remind you of the Game.

Be careful of making associations with stuff you actually love, like *The Simpsons* or brownies.

—

### **Event Horizon Whispers**

Those who have seen the movie *Interstellar*, yet have never picked up a book on the general theory of relativity, believe that matter can return after passing the event horizon of a black hole.

Everyone else and their dog knows this is impossible. People belonging to this last category will love playing EHW.

The rules are the same as for the game Chinese whispers — a message is whispered along a line of players, but with one additional rule. One player is elected specifically by the first whisperer to be the Black Hole.

The Black Hole is surrounded by an event horizon.

Whichever whisper enters his or her ear, stops there and then. The game will be concluded at this point.

It should be fairly easy to find out who is the Black Hole. It will not be easy to find out the message.

—

**More Dutch Games:**

**Yahtzee XL**

Yahtzee with 100 dice, thrown from a bucket.

—

**Unilateral Checkers**

Checkers with only one color.

—

**Hex domino**

Domino with hexadecimal numbers.

—

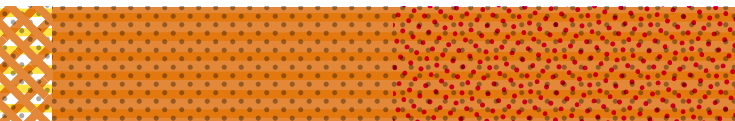
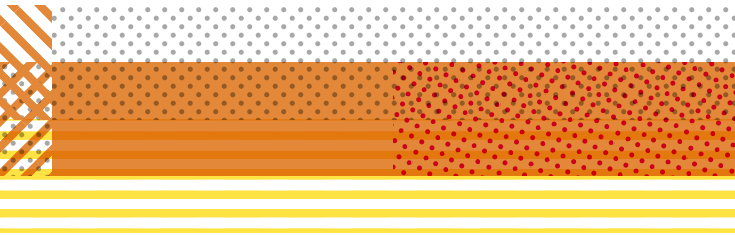
**Palindromary**

Make a palindrome out of a Dutch proverb. Continue trying all night.

—

**Risk**

Risk. (OK, this one's not Dutch.)



FICTION

# She

By Philip Huff

Translated from the Dutch by the author

She lived in an old school building; the entrance had glass double doors. A makeshift buzzer board divided the building into apartments. Most of the names on the board had been scrawled on masking tape. He stood still in the small hall between the two sets of doors; leaves lay strewn on the rubber mats. Even in the flat light, her black hair shone. When the door behind them locked into place, Marie pushed open the next one, her hand on the wired glass. Her fingers were long and thin, the skin of her knuckles dark.

The hallway was filled with the sweet smell of urine. He knew what that meant: rats.

Marie went ahead, leading him up the broad stone stairwell. They circled around an air shaft. On the landing of each flight, there were old, tattered school posters taped to the wall. 'Notice to all students,' one said, but the lettering was too small for him to read.

He looked at Marie's legs, her calves in tight black jeans. Instinctually, he placed one hand on her ass. Marie looked over her shoulder, her hand sliding up the wooden banister.

The clicking of her high-heeled shoes.

Sculpting the air.

---

Later on he would remember how it felt, following her into a bar with everyone looking at her. She's mine, he had thought. You can all look, but she's mine.

One hot summer day there had been a queue at the car rental on the Cruquiusweg. She said, 'We have a wedding to attend.'

They had neither suit nor dress on, and no bags with them. But the men in line in front of them dared not contradict her. What if they were to run into her someplace else — a bar, a restaurant? Did they want to be that asshole from the line at the car rental? The women in the queue couldn't say anything either. They'd be considered jealous.

Marie just wanted to get out of the city. It was too hot.

---

Another time, at a birthday party in the Ruysdaelstraat, he heard two women talking about Marie's figure. One of them said, 'You can tell by her legs that she exercises a lot. You need to have that kind of dedication.'

‘You mean: you need to have the time,’ the other woman said. Her hate-filled voice silenced the room.

‘Does she still work with us?’

‘She does. She went to the conservatory for piano, or something like that, but now she’s reading law. She’s Bastiaan’s assistant.’

Marie never exercised. She had plenty of time, but she never did. I know this because I was there.

I was always there.

—

*He told her what he had told other women, but this time the worn out ‘I want you’s’ sustained him, he meant it.*

Her apartment was an old classroom with an improvised kitchen in the corner where a disconnected dishwasher served as the cabinet and two wooden sawhorses held up a counter with a sink in it. Most of the furniture looked like it had been left behind by the previous tenant or taken from the street. There were tea lights and candles everywhere.

‘Cheap heating,’ she said.

The table was littered with glasses, no two alike, each still marked with dark dredgings of wine. A piano stood silent in the corner. There was sheet music scattered around it, law dictionaries lying open on the table. Marie lifted her leg and took off one of her heels.

—

Later on, coming back from Groningen, Den Haag or Kerkrade, his shoes clapping in the dark, his cameras in the bag on his shoulder, taking those stairs two steps at a time on his way to her squalid apartment, past garbage and old bicycles and cardboard boxes, he thought: See, she doesn’t give a damn either. She understands that the outside world is a landfill. Shiny metal. An exercise in vanity.

He told her what he had told other women, but this time the worn out ‘I want you’s’ sustained him, he meant it — his body, his thirsty, aching body, lived on those words. He *wanted* to say them. To say them and repeat them over and over again. To make her feel what he felt.

—

She was standing at the bar in the back of the large hall, her arms crossed, wearing a tight, black dress. He stood leaning against the wall of De Melkweg. Cold air came from a ventilation hole. The DJ onstage played loud electronic dance music.

He looked at his phone. He was scrolling through old messages, pretending to be in a conversation. He laughed. He put his phone back in his pocket and looked at her.

They made eye contact. Brief but tangible. Then he looked at her again. He let her know he was looking. He moved his eyes from her face to her feet and back up again, nodding his head to the beat of the music. And then he smiled.

She returned his smile. He looked away. He felt annoyed by the old shirt he was wearing. The annoyance surprised him.

‘You did well,’ she would say, later, on that first night, as she ran her hands over those tight black jeans. ‘That looking away uninterestedly, playing with your phone, and biting your lip — that sexy laugh. You did well.’

He couldn’t remember biting his lip.

He brought his eyes back and looked at her, as the music blared. She curled her hair around a finger. She took another sip of her beer. The air was cold.

He brought up his hand, made a gesture, *Come here*.

She mouthed, ‘You come here.’

—

Occasionally he would wake up in her apartment because someone was walking and singing in the hallway drunk, or playing the music in their apartment loud, a life momentarily impinging on his: Lana Del Rey, ‘Video Games’, on repeat for forty-five minutes.

One time he hit the coarse plasterwork separating them from their neighbour with two flat hands.

‘Knock it off!’ he said. ‘Stop!’

Nothing happened. He hit the wall again.

‘Enough!’

He didn’t think they could hear him. As he turned around, Marie was sitting up in bed, her breasts bared.

‘Why don’t you leave him be,’ she said. ‘He has to impress a new lover.’

This was how she handled annoyance: with silence and well-placed sentences. He should have noticed that.

—

Sometimes I wander through the landscape of my memories and end up at that old school building in Oost. I walk in. I climb the stairs. Her door is open. She’s inside, sitting behind the piano, wearing black jeans, a baggy shirt, the light of the piano lamp falling upon her. Her fingers are trying to find the right keys; she is humming the melody line, searching for the chords.

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘Sorry. Found it.’ And she sings: ‘*When you’re lost in the rain in Juarez, and it’s Easter time too, and your gravity fails, and negativity don’t pull you through.*’

The piano sounds fill the room like sunlight, her voice is hanging there like particles of dust: glistening, soft, everywhere.

‘*Don’t put on any airs, when you’re down on Rue Morgue Avenue; they got some hungry women there, and they really make a mess outta you.*’

He’s there too, of course, lying on the ground, eyes closed, listening.

‘*Now if you see St Annie, please tell her thanks a lot. I cannot move, my fingers are all in a knot.*’

And he, too, remembers.

Here we go again.

—

He looked around her classroom apartment, white light from outside coming in through the windows. The walls were cracked; there were leakage marks on the ceiling. It smelled a little damp.

He walked over to Marie, who was standing, and put his hands on her hips. Without her heels on, she was even shorter. He pressed his lips into her neck. The skin was soft and tight. She jolted; her body shuddered, as if she was cold. She pulled him in. His mouth found hers. Her lips were a little rough; her teeth clicked against his. Her tongue felt warm and soft; there was a small string of

saliva between his mouth and hers as she pulled back and smiled.

‘I like that.’

‘Me too,’ he said.

He held her face in his hands: her flat nose pierced by a small ring; the curve of her upper lip, her square chin — all of it. His heart tightened. He took her hand and they walked over to the table; Marie sat on the top of it. A wine bottle plugged with a candle fell and rolled towards the edge of the table. It landed on the floor with a loud thump.

She undid his belt, unbuttoned his jeans; her dark fingers edged up against his hard cock and he trembled. When she kissed him on the mouth, their foreheads bumped. She smiled again. The white of her teeth, the pink of her lips, the caramel colour of her skin — it all shone in that magnifying semi-darkness.

*He brought up his hand, made a gesture, Come here.*

*She mouthed, ‘You come here.’*

This was happening. He was leaving it all behind, the waiting, the wondering, the wanting. This was a new era of wondering, of wanting, of deficiency, but there was no need to think of that now. He kissed her again, more forcefully. Marie grabbed his wrists; her long nails pressed sharply into his skin. From the table they moved to the bed — a mattress on the floor, really — undressing each other greedily at every step.

—

At the bar of De Melkweg he leaned in close and said,

‘Confession: I don’t really like this music.’

He could feel strands of her hair moving against his face. It smelled of lemon and lavender. He breathed in her smell.

She noticed, edging closer.

‘Neither do I,’ she said.

Men kept glancing at her, at them.

‘It isn’t female-friendly music,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t have enough melody.’

‘Not enough what?’

‘Melody. Women want a melody.’

‘Do they now?’

‘To make plans. They sing along to songs. Men want a rhythm, something they can tap along to. This is drum music. It doesn’t have a future. There’s no plan.’

‘There isn’t? That’s too bad...’

His stomach fluttered when she said that. They had known each other for three hours.

Now, her head was on the pillow. Her dense hair bobbed gently as he entered her. His hand landed on her flesh with a sharp slap.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Yes.’ She grumbled and bit down on the pillow.

Her back was gleaming with sweat. He saw the vertebrae under her skin, the ribs, her shoulder blades. His hands gripped her ass, then he reached up, another feeling overwhelming him. He grabbed her hair and pulled it; her head arced back towards him.

‘You’re mine,’ he said. ‘Mine.’

The silver light fell on her high cheeks.

‘I want you to fill me up completely,’ she said.

Her words barely filled the large room around them.

‘I want you to fuck me completely.’

They spent hours in that bed — weeks, months — talking. Talking and fucking. Fucking and talking. About his work, her work, her music. A saucer on the floor near the bed was filled with milk for the neighbour’s cat.

‘He shits on the bed when I leave,’ she said.

‘That’s cat poop,’ he said. ‘Ungrateful bastard.’

He turned her around, thrusting her down on the bed, and pushed her wrists deeper into the mattress. He felt with his tongue on his lower lip. It bled a little where she had bitten him. He entered her again and her nostrils flared: she fell down further, harder, into the bed, then clawed back again, to meet him, ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Fuck me. Fuck me hard.’

When he let go of one of her arms; her wet fingers were suddenly on his stubbled chin; her salty taste in his mouth.

He wrapped his hand around her throat, her fingers still in his mouth, the tips hooked behind his teeth. The skin of her neck was soft, but the sinews underneath were tight as rope, and her larynx seemed made of stone. His fingers disappeared deep into her flesh.

He lay in that room and slowly saw the light changing, from honey yellow to grey white. It grew colder. When he would leave her building, the birds cawed from the bare branches. The gutters filled with leaves. She sat behind the piano and played, Bob Dylan, Queen, Rihanna.

Winter came. Frost appeared on the windows. The canals froze over. When the cold reached their bones, he bought her a winter coat. She made her own woolen cap to go with it. It became spring again. They bought fruit and nuts at the Dappermarkt. He mixed them into her yoghurt. She peeled her grapes. He had never seen anyone do that before. Her nipples were perfect buds, dark in colour. She had healthy, large teeth. All the times she smiled: I am not making them up.

That first night, after fucking, she went to the bathroom. He switched on the lamp next to the bed. There was dried blood on his fingers the colour of rust. On his cock. The blood on the sheet had soaked through to the mattress cover. He only smelled it after he had seen it.

He walked across the room to the kitchen sink, the wooden floor felt cold underneath his feet, as and turned on the tap. He heard the flush and scurried back to bed, his hands still wet. The light of the bathroom fell on the floor in a bright rectangle and Marie appeared again: her taut body, her dark nipples, her hard stomach. Her pubic hair in the shape of a diamond.

‘I hope I just got my period,’ she said. ‘Either that, or this is going to be tough.’

He smiled. She crawled in next to him and fell asleep quickly.

He lay awake and watched the light slowly change from silvery grey into black blue and, finally, into a greyish white. Mice skittered across the floor. There were so many it sounded like rain. She lay next to him, blissfully unaware, a small speck of spit in the corner of her mouth.

His body was tired and his eyes burned but he didn’t want to fall asleep. Usually this was the hardest part: to be awake, in someone else’s bed, in a strange room, his armour of nonchalance taken off and replaced by a naked body, stabbing himself. But his thoughts were soft at the edges now. He wanted to take it all in.

—

*Mice skittered across the floor. There were so many it sounded like rain. She lay next to him, blissfully unaware, a small speck of spit in the corner of her mouth.*

The next morning, he woke as she got up and out of bed. Outside was a blue sky. The branches on the trees were gently shaking. Next door, they were playing *The Köln Concert*. He sat up against the wall. She never removed her eyeliner before going to bed; her pillowcase was covered in black smears. There were flowers in the room he hadn’t noticed, placed in various receptacles: a pint glass, a water pitcher.

She got back into bed with some tangerines that she slowly started to peel. After taking off the rind, she started

picking the white inner skin off the fruit. His stomach rumbled.

‘Do you know what this is called?’ she asked, holding up a little bit of the small white membrane. She handed him a piece.

The back of his head rolled against the wall as he shook it. ‘I don’t,’ he said. ‘Thank you.’

‘Neither do I,’ she said.

She ate the tangerines in bed, smacking her lips a little. When she was done she laid down again, her head low on his chest. He liked the tight feeling of her hair.

Afterwards, they stood talking in the shower. She had tattoos on her arms and her fingers and her chest. This close, they were easier to discern. One was a composition of two mirrored F-clefs making a heart.

‘Did it hurt?’ he asked, fingertips tracing the ink.

She shrugged her shoulders; water poured from her mouth. ‘Not really.’

‘Will you sing for me once?’ he said.

‘Maybe,’ she said. She talked about Curaçao, island life, her school in Willemstad, her parents and her parents’ friends: ‘I never wanted to walk the narrow path they all walked,’ she said. ‘That’s why I came here to study music. Too bad there’s no market for me.’ She laughed. ‘We just had sex so you don’t mind if I take a piss, do you?’

He smiled as he shook his head.

The warm air was bitter: fat, round drops, yellow like concentrated apple juice, fell down with the water coming out of the showerhead.

‘What are we doing today?’ she asked afterwards, drying herself with a towel.

Her neck was long and delicate.

—

They spent that winter together, the spring, the summer, the autumn. She went back to college and finished the last few courses, studied for her law exams. Two days a week she started working for the law firm again. That’s probably when she started seeing Bastiaan, too. But she didn’t tell him about Bastiaan. She didn’t tell him she was falling in love with someone else. She took the easy way out.



It made sense. It was what he had liked about her: that she never divulged herself. She didn't owe the world anything, let alone an explanation.

I am remembering all this the way I am telling it to you. I am owning up to the truth. Because of my vantage point, I am able to tell you all these things they would never tell you themselves. I am telling you what happened to them even if she would disagree. Of course she would.

—

He was playing with her clit. The sheets were lying on the floor. The insides of her thighs were wet.

'Gently,' she said. 'Gently. Yes. Like this.'

Her breathing was speeding up, her moaning becoming louder.

'I'm going to come...' she said.

'I want to hear you,' he said. 'I want to hear you.'

She came and after she had come he entered her again, very gently, and pushed on until he, too, came. They were spent.

Towards the end of the relationship, she once admitted no one else made her come as well as he did. She was drunk then.

'And anyway,' she said, 'there's more to it than that.'

—

They had taken the train from Amsterdam to Alkmaar, then got into a bus that brought them closer to the coast. Now, they were standing at the edge of a field; a large

white horse had approached the fence. Marie put her hand on its long muzzle and stroked it. The horse's eyes were round and black and bulging. It was impossible to know what was going on behind them. It was impossible to know what was going on anywhere, he thought. But everything was exquisite in the cold and clear light and he had a strong sensation of how much they belonged to each other, and how, together, they belonged to the world. This was the first day of *their* life. This was just the beginning; it was all unfolding around them.

The horse shook his head and seemed to stretch its limbs. Marie withdrew her hand. An enormous cock appeared from the barrel between its hind legs. It still dangled a bit, growing firmer as the stallion started to piss. The stallion lifted his front hoofs one at a time. His piss spread out on the ground and steamed in the crisp winter air.

'Jesus,' she said.

'Yes, what a relief that must be,' he said.

There was a house nearby he had often visited as a child. It belonged to a family from Amsterdam. It had no heating upstairs; there was only one bathroom. The family kept a key underneath a wooden bench beside the front door.

'It's beautiful,' she said.

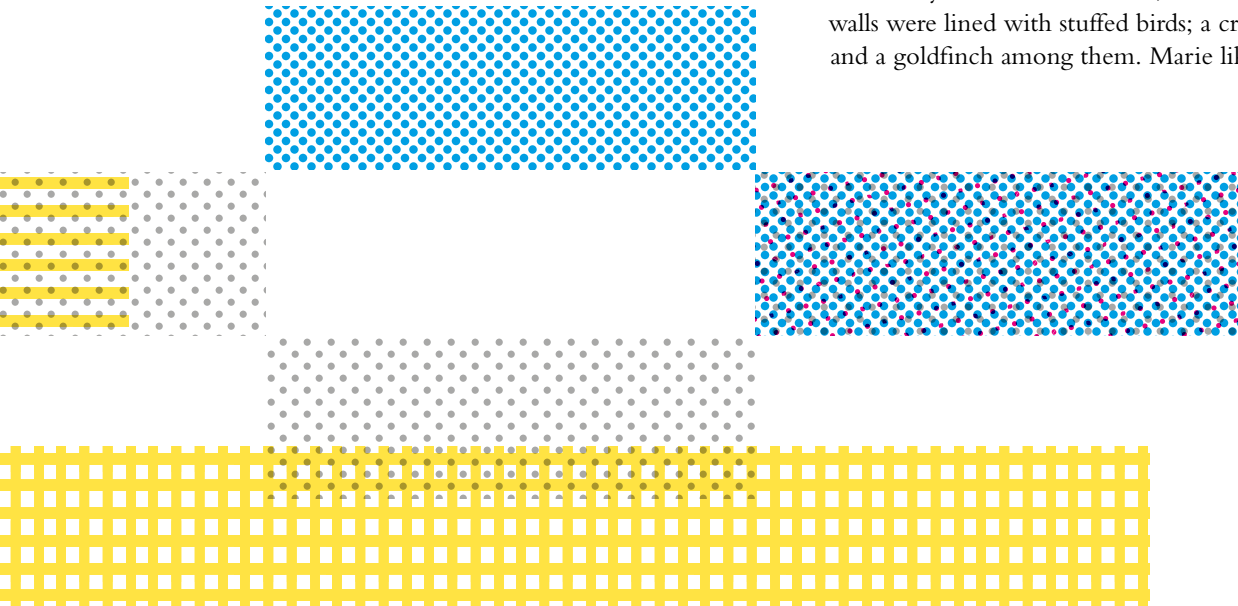
'I told you.'

The gravel crackled as they walked up to the house; the key was in its usual place.

'Are you sure we can do this?' Marie asked.

'Of course,' he said. He opened the door, trying to conceal his shaking hands. He liked opening doors. The vestibule smelled the same as it always had, of stale air and old wood.

Once they had closed the door, it was easier to relax. The walls were lined with stuffed birds; a crossbill, a redwing and a goldfinch among them. Marie liked the look of a



pair of common bullfinches. Next to them hung the heads of deer and wild boars and two landscape paintings of the coast. Portraits of grey-haired white men looking rather pink were framed on the wall: dignitaries in oil paint.

‘Yes, I remember these,’ he said. ‘I liked them. I feel like drawing a moustache on them now though. A Hitler one. They always have the same smug expression.’

‘You can’t,’ Marie said. ‘We’re guests here.’

At the back of the house there was a large kitchen, with a big green oil-fired stove and cream cupboards. The shutters were closed. A green sheet with a print he recognized covered the contours of a table and its wooden chairs. There was nothing in the refrigerator except some butter and olive oil.

‘They’re not very hospitable, are they?’ he said. ‘Unless you want some olive oil with your butter.’

‘Have you noticed that people with money are never very generous? Unless it involves some exhibit hall they can name after themselves, of course. A wing with the donor’s name on it.’

The drawing room was dark too: the walls were dark, the upholstered furniture was dark, even the shuttered windows were dark — no light came in at all. It was only at the back of the hallway that a ray of sunshine entered through a skylight three floors up.

He grabbed her hand. ‘Come with me,’ he said.

—

She wet her fingers before she fingered herself. She sat down on the bed on her hands and knees and looked over her shoulder towards him. ‘Are you going to stand there and stare or are you going to come here and fuck me?’

He pushed his cock in all the way up to his pubic hair. When she took his balls in her mouth, it felt as if she was sucking the inside of his scrotum. She stuck a finger up his ass, because she wanted to ‘hurt him, too’.

When he came, his head emptied of all thoughts.

‘I love it when you come inside me,’ she said. ‘I feel like we’re two animals doing what we’re supposed to do.’

—

Their life that summer was glorious, it was a flood. It can be best described in its moments of brilliance: a deer standing in a forest, the light falling on its antlers through

the roof of leaves, the creature frozen in the speckled shadow of the foliage, the sheen of its fur almost orange. The silent seconds pass. His shoe presses down, a twig snaps, the silence shrinks. The creature leaps away. All of this, this moment too, is woven into a tapestry of regret now, thus deceiving us. It was great, it was glorious.

He loved her so much he doesn’t believe it now; he laughs about it, a long, hard and cynical laugh. It is the laugh of someone who has lost.

*He loved her so much he doesn’t believe it now; he laughs about it, a long, hard and cynical laugh. It is the laugh of someone who has lost.*

After she had left him, he would press his body up against the wall of his house, his arms spread. The plaster felt cold on his cheek, but the bricks behind it held her voice. He should be able to squeeze it from the stones. But the wall was too wide to get his arms around. In bed, he would close his eyes and see her sitting in Bastiaan’s car; he would see them at work, whispering, laughing, their fingers linking with each other underneath the meeting room table. He had to hurry. He wrote her long letters. And imagined her reading them in bed, sitting up, her eyes narrowed in concentration. He never sent them, so she never read a word, never read about his heart beating against that cold white wall as the room went dark, never heard about that low, humming noise walls seem to make.

—

He remembered how they lay there, in that house in the dunes of Bergen aan Zee, in the silence of a calm crisp winter afternoon, in a bed that wasn’t theirs, but now was, at least for that evening and that night. They had just made love. He lay on his side, stroking Marie’s shoulder; a small opening between two shutters let in the last of the sunlight. She was talking of past holidays, her first in the Netherlands. She had gone to Zeeland with some friends. She thought it was too crowded and too cold. She didn’t like the small families, peering only at each other. She felt distinctly separate as she walked past them. They’d created suburbs on the beach. The uncomplicated pleasure of beach life wasn’t there. She began to understand what it

meant to be different. She felt she would always have to be more.

‘It’d be nice to have a house like this,’ she said.

‘Hmm...’ he murmured. It was quiet outside, warm under the blankets.

‘A big bath full of foam and two kids. Girls, preferably. A few dogs. Toys lying around in the garden.’

‘That’ll be hard,’ he said. ‘A house like this is unaffordable.’

‘I guess one could also rent it over the summer,’ she said, gently pursing her lips. ‘Ownership *is* a hassle. And it’s hard to be able to afford something like this year round. But maybe, as a family house, we could pull it off. I can’t live for ever in the kind of place I’m living in now.’

As his hand touched her soft shoulder, he said, ‘I request another dream to realize.’

Please, I know how this sounds, but I am remembering this scene as it happened; I’m chained to what was said, however foolish. And I can’t undo it. I may have missed some beats.

She rolled over, her breasts the same colour all over. Her fingers touched the stubble on his cheek.

‘Next time,’ she said. ‘I’ll take you to my childhood beach.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘A day trip to Curaçao. Wouldn’t that be nice?’

She traced his mouth. He felt his lips curl into a smile, a warm sensation filling his chest. He felt sleep coming, too.

‘Are you sure we can stay?’ she said.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Yes. I’m sure.’

And he disappeared between her legs. Every night and every morning he would disappear between there.

I am writing this down because he wants to remember how it happened, as it was. And that it was what they both wanted.

Regardless of what she later said.

—

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, early one December morning in her apartment. They had been seeing each other for a little over a year. ‘But the feeling is gone. I’m... tired. Tired of the things I say. Tired of what *you* say. I’m tired

of us, babe... I have been for months now.’ They had already been awake a few hours, talking and talking. Now she looked at him apologetically. ‘I’m tired of these arguments. Tired of all this negativity. Tired of our fucking.’ Her sigh was deep and long.

She sat up against the wall. ‘I just don’t want it any more. When we wake up, my first thought is, “How do I get him out of my bed?” I don’t want to fuck you any more. I don’t want to lie in bed until eleven every day. There’s more to life than that. I —’

It hadn’t anything to do with their mornings. It was about what she wanted. It was about a fifth-floor apartment with a working elevator, it was about a nice address with trees somewhere close; it was about fancy dress shirts, expensive wristwatches and fashionable sunglasses. It was about an extra bedroom and a savings account for college. She’d been taught to think about those things when she was young. She wanted to escape from where she was.

He got out of bed. The floor was sticky.

‘You’re fucking Bastiaan, aren’t you?’

She was silent, the duvet wrapped around her. She looked at her hands.

‘How long has it been going on?’

She still did not dare to look at him.

‘I said, how long have you been fucking him?’

She looked up. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she said. ‘What I felt for you is gone.’

Despite his suspicions, he had not thought she was fucking Bastiaan. His fists loosened, his fingers covered his face.

He slumped against the cold wall. His eyes burned.

—

There were pigeons in the communal gardens of her building. She fed them ground flaxseed. With pink-ringed eyes they watched her beautiful hands; their bobbing heads went down quickly. Most of them were missing a toe or an eye or even a whole foot. They were a battered bunch. She stood feeding them, and had looked so very happy.

He felt like he wanted to jump into the abyss with her. Until he had met her, for him, the idea had been preposterous. Uncomplicated pleasure seemed to him the very fullness of life. But now he knew that uncomplicated pleasure could not go on for ever. It provided no mooring. He began to think about the costs of a house and of

those inflatable pools that go in the garden. How many assignments would he have to complete for one inflatable pool? How many jobs to get that mortgage? If that's the world, how much do you want for it?

—

Forgive me if I'm skipping over certain bits. When they had a fight, she was scared he would hit her, although of course he never did, and he wasn't allowed to touch her for days. She would sit on the windowsill and say, 'Maybe it's best if you leave.' That was all.

Now imagine her sitting at the kitchen table with a big bag of apples and an apple-core remover. He had bought her those apples. She was making a cake. She always made cakes at times like that. And every time she handled that sharp instrument he was afraid she would hurt herself. She moved the blade carelessly. But he wasn't allowed to approach her.

Maybe that was her way of punishing him. By keeping him close but out of reach. Maybe she thought her presence was enough to persuade him to start a family. She had no idea how close she got. Perhaps he shouldn't have celebrated his independence so much, his unwillingness to compromise, his loathing of families.

The last time he saw her was when he had to collect some things at her place, including his computer. She hardly looked at him. He had quit his job at the newspaper. He noticed all their photos were gone, even the post card taped to the fridge they had bought in Bergen aan Zee.

'If you have to do this,' he said, 'you could at least have had the decency to keep one photograph. Is it necessary to destroy all that you're leaving behind?'

'You can't destroy anything,' she said, 'when there's nothing to leave behind.'

—

The months after she left him, he told me he mostly saw her in his dreams. Sometimes, too, in the crowds on Saturday. Or in a crowded bar. But it was never her, until he ran into her at some fancy new place on Het Rembrandtplein. It was a weekday. He was sitting at the bar. All of a sudden, she was standing next to him.

He often thought of the moment when he would run into her and what he would do and say. But now that she was here, he had no idea what to do.

'Hey,' she said. She had let her hair grow out. 'Hi. How are you?'

He said nothing.

'You look like shit.'

He looked at himself in the mirror behind the bar. He hadn't shaved in two months.

'You look fantastic,' he said.

She smiled. 'Thank you. How are you?'

'I'm well,' she said. 'I got a promotion.'

He looked at her thin wrists, her dark skin, her pink nails. He remembered those nails.

'I don't know what to say,' he said.

He pulled her close, still leaning against the bar. The irises in her green eyes grew larger.

'What are you doing?' she said.

The bartender looked over. He let her go. There were stained-glass windows above the bar. He had never seen them before.

'I just wanted to hold you for a second,' he said. 'I thought that was OK.'

'Well, it wasn't and it isn't.'

'Will you sleep with me?'

She laughed.

'Do you want to have his babies? Please don't make accidental babies with him.'

Suddenly, Bastiaan was standing next to her. They both knew that trick, apparently.

'Hello,' he said. 'How have you been?'

Bastiaan ignored his question. He looked at Marie. 'Is there anything I can do to help?'

'No, I was just saying hi,' she said. 'He's just leaving.'

Bastiaan nodded. 'Good. I'll wait for you at the table then.'

As Bastiaan turned around, he got off his chair hit him in the face, well, the side of his face. Right on his jaw.

Afterwards, while still lying on the ground, Bastiaan said, 'Motherfucker. You hit me from behind.'

Because she loved him (did she?), he let Bastiaan get away with that.

—

That day in Bergen they had stood on the beach, overlooking the North Sea. A flock of gulls had passed over their heads and fluttered out over the grey, endless water. He had wondered if it was to going to be like that with them: if they would go on until it all simply disappeared into nothing. He hoped so. Imagine that: he had actually hoped for what would happen. But he thought it would be the two of them together. While all along she was looking for another kind of life, a life more tailored to her needs.

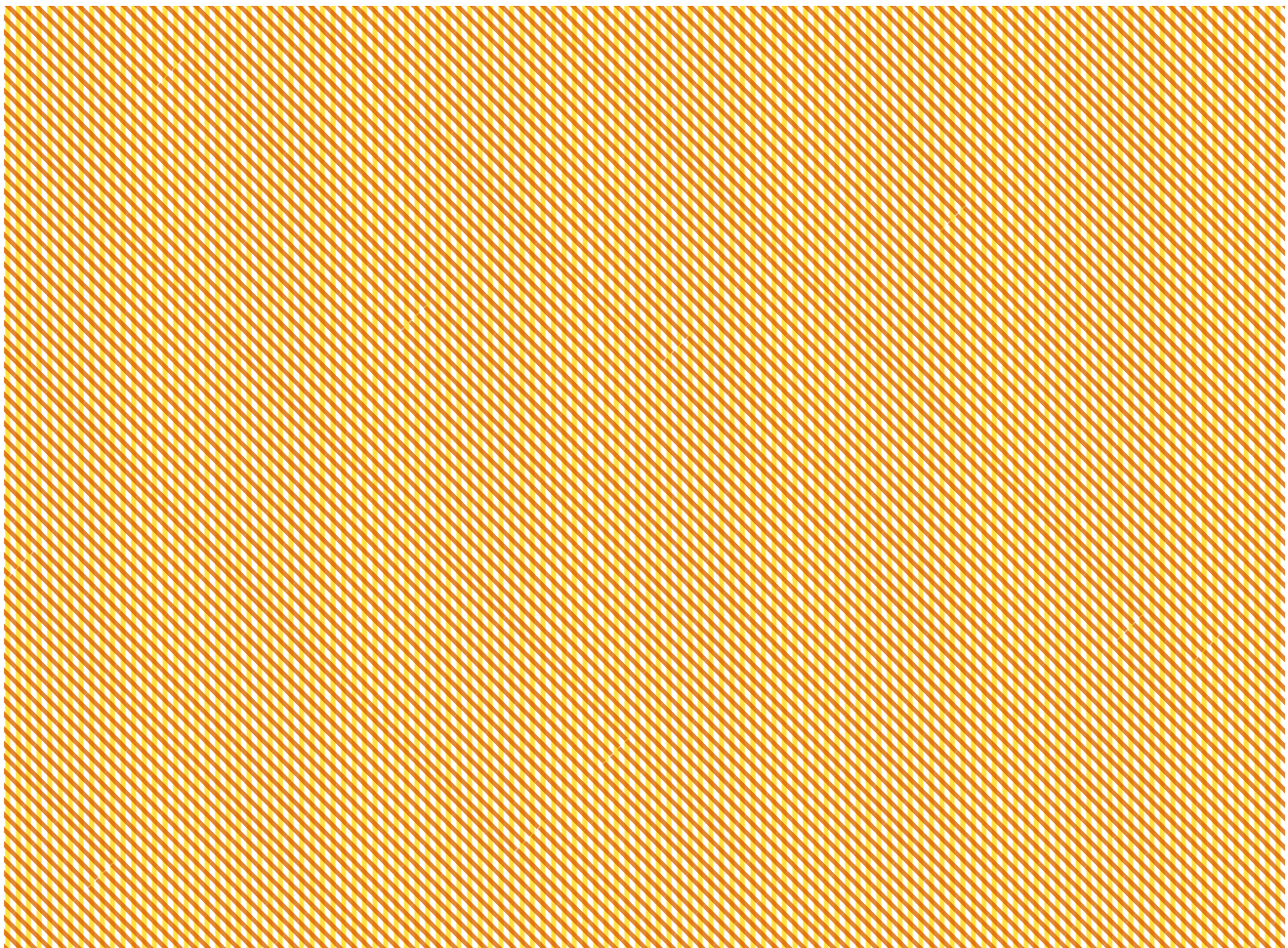
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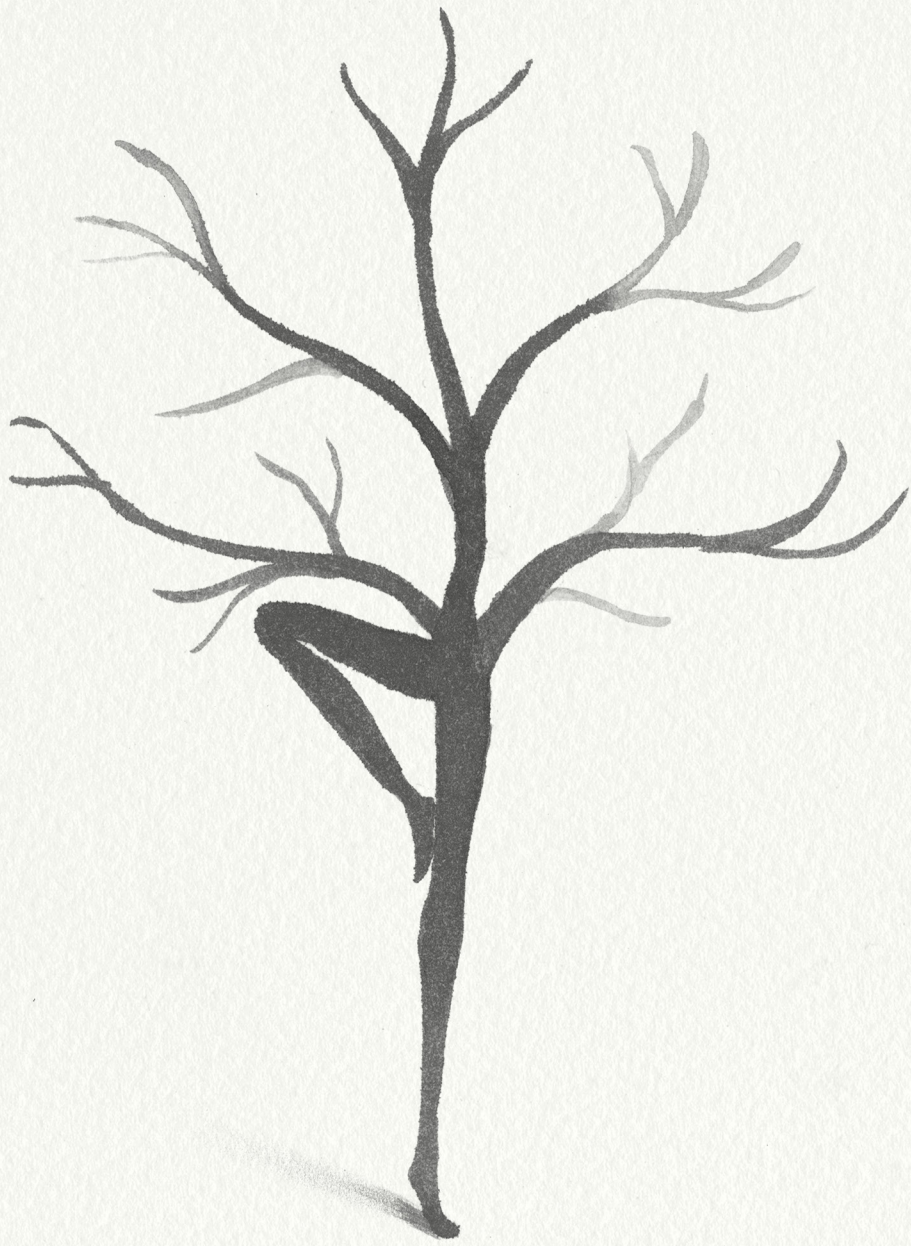
There was a time — a season, really; *their* season — when he thought he had it all. That he owned the city, the river, the bridges, the canals. He would open up the window in the morning and think: Fuck you and your rules. There was a time when he thought: You can all do it your way, but I refuse.

This was the time of the wedding cakes with light blue icing and the mortgages and the Bugaboos. The time of Volvos and their car radios that had to be turned down, the time of receding hairlines and marriage counseling. This was the time of self-confidence. She was his compass. Now he was back where he'd started. On the edge of it,

writing and burning letters, taking pictures, rejecting one image accepting another.

But that morning in the seaside house in Bergen, as he lay there and looked at Marie again — at the fold in her earlobe; the dark spots under her eyes; the small black clots of mascara on the tips of her eyelashes; the fine lines on her lips — he felt very clearly that he wanted to share everything with her: the city, his thoughts, his past, the pastures, the beaches of Bergen. He felt it very strongly. He felt very strongly that for her he might change. And he would have. Then a strange constricting sensation arose in his chest, near his sternum. He tried clearing his throat without making a sound but ended up waking her from whatever dream she was having. She was smiling. She smiled at him. 'Hey,' she said. ♦















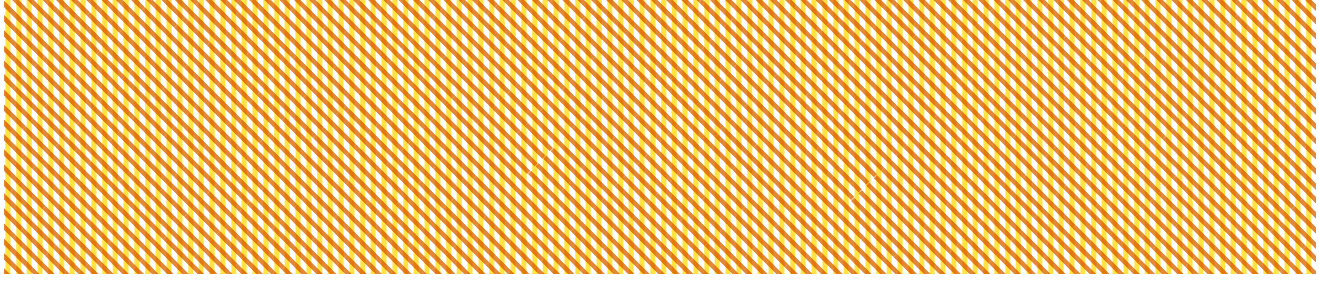












Above illustrations by Iris Le Rütte

TWO POEMS

# Ester Naomi Perquin

Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer

**Table Talk** (consisting of three poems)

I

When people talk about people they say 'they'. They do it  
over the starters. You're sitting between them and  
nod now and then, but you have no idea  
what all the spoons are for.

'They' are other people, not the people who are talking,  
but the people they are talking about. I have never  
claimed to love the word 'they', I just hear it.  
I'm no fonder of 'it', you think.

'It' is something that happens in another country, in a big drought  
with flies everywhere, the smell of fruit not even  
describable anymore, all eyes directed at  
unreachably distant, fat waterbirds.

They point out a spelling error in the main course, nudge  
each other and laugh, butter their bread. It makes  
me think of 'a', which is closest to my heart.  
A table. A meal. A guinea fowl.

When people talk about people they never say, there is someone  
here that. Or someone who is clearly. There is definitely,  
without doubt, statistically, someone here who.  
'They' has excluded us from consideration.

Every dinner has a raped woman. A homosexual.  
An illiterate. A man who knows what all  
the spoons are for. You're better off  
not talking to *him*.



If you have to say something about meat you say 'this'. This is the part that has no eyes and no name, that didn't spend days on end walking around on boggy grass, a bit you didn't wave at when you were little.

Someone sticks the point of a knife in the back of your hand, someone attacks you, someone asks for your heart as if that's something that belongs on the table, and you decide you'd better make a joke of it. No one laughs.

It's only when you've had too much to drink that you tell the story of the meat as it really was. You would like to include a farmer with a double-barrelled shotgun, a smokehouse full of wood.

But you talk about a screen, a panel with three buttons, the winch, the advertising man who wanted to make love to his wife in the middle of the night and then thought of the perfect slogan.

Brainwaves, you say, are apparently easy to come by when it's right in front of your nose. When you really bury yourself in it. Nobody wants to get into that at the moment.

Around the time the last wine has been poured a man gets up from the table and kneels cautiously beside you.

You can smell what he'll be like later, each evening, when he has finished his meal, pushes his plate away and looks at you, you can already guess the words he uses — you look away and hastily lay your hands on your lap.

In Paris a woman is asked to share her life every minute. Their existences aren't cramped there, they are quick to move up, sliding shelves empty for someone else's things, calling their mothers with joy.

What you'd like to do now is make an impression. Grabbing the tablecloth with both hands and whipping it out in a single movement without knocking anything over. Everyone clapping.

But the man has laid his head on your knee and there are gestures you can never escape, they come to you so naturally.

You stroke his hair, while thinking about everyone you missed today and how, vicariously, to touch them.

That day I tumbled, unsuspecting, into someone else's life, someone else's driving lesson, shopping list, lecture, into someone else's hesitations, beginner's legs at ballet.

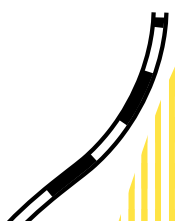
And nowhere was I lost, I walked countless orphans to respectable parents and taught a drinking man to trust his glass would last,

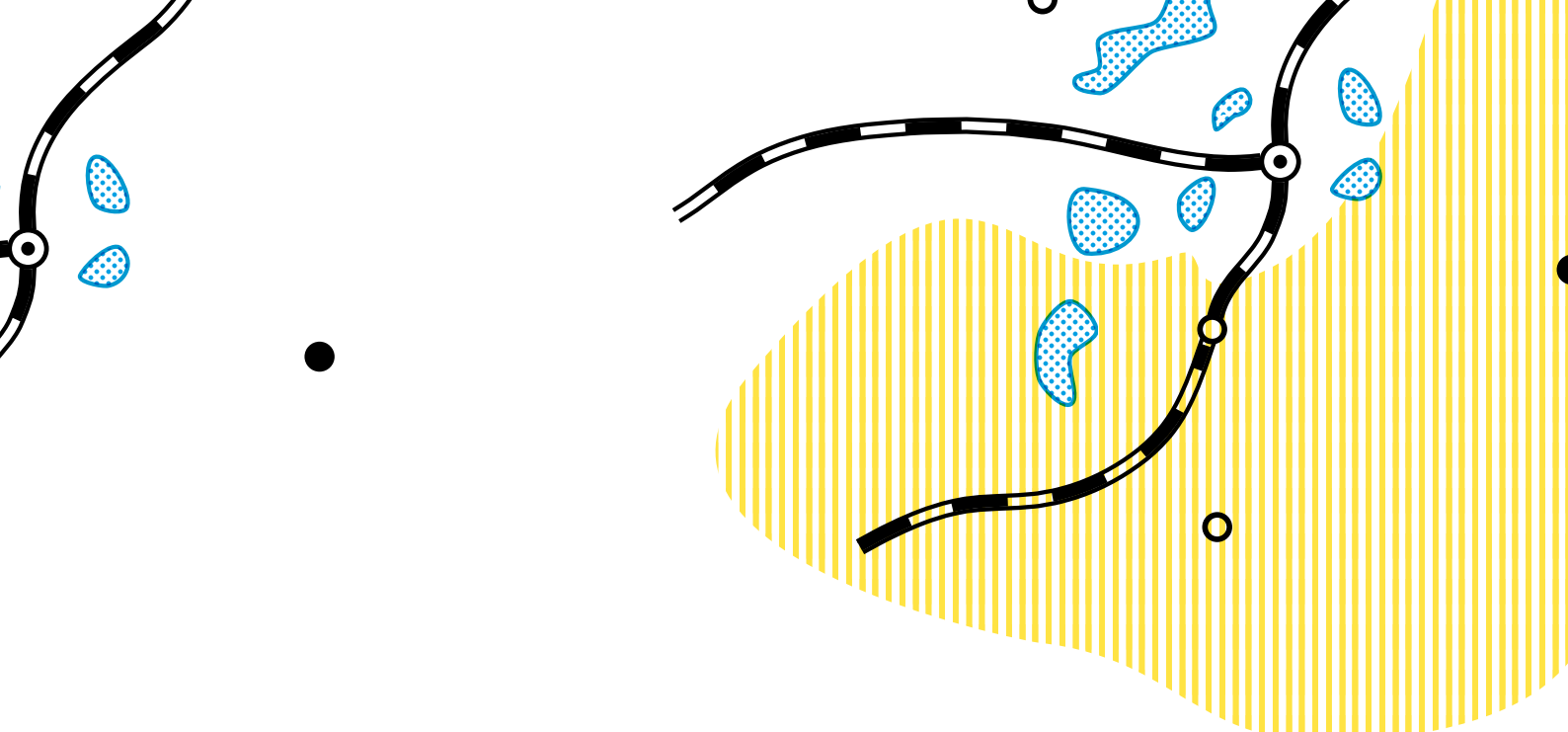
I stormed bruised and battered women out of houses, shuffled beggars into castles, made a cold mother kneel in time beside a fallen child, I was that fallen child.

I taught a footballer to believe in God like the smack of the ball on the crossbar, a blind man to find everything he lacked without asking, I was the talent the painter had to rise above his light.

Only a skinny, early-morning swimmer's totally unquestioning dive into the pool between the trees, came out too forced.

Powerless, she hovered over the water while I slipped back, in motion once again, leaving her to shiver, losing heart, the swimsuit already starting to vanish.





OUR SCATTERED CORRESPONDENTS

## Invisible Books

Thomas Heerma van Voss learns the hard truths of independent publishing

Translated from the Dutch by Alice Tetley-Paul

50 | How Can This Be Possible?

I still get asked about it on the odd occasion. By the handful of people who saw me selling books at the Small Publishers' Fair. By peers who've found information that I barely knew was public somewhere in the depths of the Internet. By *Volkskrant* readers who saw that photo several years ago, of three young men and one not-so-young man leaning over a bridge.

Whenever they bring it up, they always ask the same thing: I might be mistaken, but didn't you use to work for a publishing house?

Yes, I did work for a Dutch publishing house for a few years. As an editor. I didn't edit any manuscripts though, didn't acquire any writers, didn't get paid and, I'd better admit it from the outset, didn't have a contract either. But still. There was a publishing house, officially registered with the Chamber of Commerce, complete with logo, website, books in the shop — the works. And I, a twenty-year-old student of Dutch who'd published his first fiction title not long before, became an editor there.

The name of the publisher: Babel & Voss. Established in 2009 by Reinjan Mulder (b. 1949), who I've known almost my entire life through my friendship with his son, together with Daniël van der Meer (b. 1986) and my brother Daan (b. 1986).

The idea was simple. They'd establish a modest list, fiction and non-fiction, Dutch and translations, consisting exclusively of books they'd actually want to read themselves. They'd stand out due to their meticulous editing. They wouldn't publish dozens of titles each year like other publishing houses: the well-known scattergun approach. They wouldn't circulate hefty prospectuses or work with authors they couldn't see any potential in. No, they'd keep it small, guarantee the highest quality, and in the old-fashioned book world their publishing house would be one of the first to embrace the Internet.

Reinjan had worked at various publishing houses before; he'd discovered authors and had successes to his name, such as the secret metamorphosis of Arnon Grunberg into Marek van der Jagt. Whenever I saw him, Reinjan always made a satisfied, cheerful impression. But he still felt as if something was missing from his life. Since entering the book world in the late 1980s, first as a journalist and later as an editor and publisher, he'd had a fantasy, a childhood dream that hadn't faded away like many dreams do, but had only become stronger over time.

He wanted to start his own publishing house.

Of course, he was well aware of the difficulties. In 2009, the book industry was not yet in visible distress, but the

prophecies of doom were starting to sound increasingly convincing and phrases that have since become awfully commonplace were starting to take shape. A decline in reading, fund mergers, outdated revenue models. But Reinjan wanted to give it a go, especially when Daniël and Daan approached him for advice about starting their own publishing house. Reinjan suggested joining forces. He had experience as a publisher, could afford a certain amount of financial risk and wanted nothing more than to release his own titles. Daniël and Daan, who'd just started a series of interviews in *De Groene Amsterdammer*, would, above all, be able to help find young, ambitious authors.

*I didn't edit any manuscripts, didn't acquire any writers, didn't get paid and, I'd better admit it from the outset, didn't have a contract either. But still. There was a publishing house.*

I was involved in the whole process from the sidelines. Actually, perhaps I stayed on the sidelines the entire time, although one day my role became official. My brother dropped out after two books, he didn't have time for it any more, or lost interest, which amounted to the same thing. When I asked him about it, he said, 'I was going through some emotional turmoil at the time. And the endless side issues annoyed me too much. In fact, publishing itself annoyed me too much.' In 2011, I took his place. During a lecture about experimental poetry that dated back many centuries, in which each student was being forced to read a page out loud, I got a call from Daniël. I mumbled that I had to go to the toilet, made a dash for the corridor and heard Daniël say, 'Would you perhaps like to become an editor? We don't have any authors yet, and we can't pay you. But it'll be an investment.'

I thought: investment, that sounds good, I'd like to give it a go. And I shared Daniël's conviction that the world of publishing had not yet reached its full potential. So many books were being thrown half-heartedly into the market without an underlying plan; Babel & Voss wouldn't be that haphazard. Anyway: how many twenty-year-olds get the chance to publish and edit books themselves?

I agreed without a moment's hesitation. Within an hour, Daniël had posted the news on the Babel & Voss website that I was going to be 'strengthening the team'. As of that day, I was officially an editor.

—

Our office was on the top floor of a dilapidated building in the Wallen, Amsterdam's red-light district. On the ground floor was a medical centre, where there was always a handful of young adults dressed in shabby clothes sitting behind a thick glass wall, sometimes groaning softly, as they waited to see a doctor. It turned out that the Salvation Army was barely a hundred metres further on.

Whenever we arrived for a meeting, there'd be dozens of empty, tired eyes staring at us as we entered the building.

Beside the entrance was an A4 sheet of paper with 'We don't dispense methadone' printed on it.

Once inside the office — a room with fluorescent lighting, water-stained walls and desks for dozens of freelancers — Babel & Voss had its own corner, with its own bookcase, its own desk, its own records, its own pile of papers.

My main task was to assess the manuscripts that came in. It was about one a week — far fewer than at other publishing houses, at least so I've heard. I often wondered why, unless they knew someone at Babel & Voss, an author who was just starting out would decide to send their work to this publishing house in particular. My suspicion that they'd probably already been rejected by other publishers was only reinforced when I started looking at the manuscripts. With the exception of a few unintentional highlights in cover letters ('A clairvoyant gave me a task eight years ago, only she didn't say what the task was because I was supposed to figure it out myself before my 30th birthday. Unfortunately this turned out to be a book, and in particular the contents of the book'), I didn't come across anything worth publishing. I always reported back at our fortnightly meetings, and my assessment could usually be summed up in one word: no.

Still, the difficulty in running our own publishing house didn't lie in finding titles. Although there wasn't anything usable in any of the manuscripts, there were plenty of ideas floating around. Reinjan always had something new up his sleeve. For collections, translations, debuts of young Dutch authors we knew via friends of friends. And the difficulty didn't lie in turning these ideas into reality either. We even managed — and by we I actually mean Daniël and Reinjan — to turn some of our vague plans into books.

In 2010, Babel & Voss's first book, *What We Can Do Without: A Manifesto against Excess* was published, a collection of stories and essays compiled by Daan, Daniël

and Reinjan. Thirty authors provided contributions; some were unknown and just starting out (like me), but we managed to get a few established names on board too. Felix Rottenberg, Arie Boomsma, Micha Wertheim: they all wrote a contribution about something they could do without. Perhaps they simply didn't dare say no. Kees van Kooten and Arnon Grunberg both, independently of each other, wrote that they could do without initiatives like *What We Can Do Without*. In his opening paragraph, Grunberg wrote, 'If this collection's remaindered in a year or so (maybe sooner), nobody will notice it's gone.'

But we didn't let that discourage us. 'It's all good,' Reinjan said during one of our meetings. 'Stirring things up a bit can't do any harm. And so many publishing houses are built on favours to friends and obligatory pieces.'

We spent months tinkering with the texts. We hired an agent who went to bookshops on our behalf, a cover was designed, some authors dropped out, but new names were added too.

Then, one weekday afternoon, the moment was upon us: the book arrived from the printers. Reinjan sent us a message, 'They're here! I'll wait to open them.'

Barely half an hour later, Daan, Daniël and I were in the office. We each took one of the cardboard boxes filled with books that had been delivered to the medical centre. We carried them upstairs and put them under the fluorescent light, like doctors about to operate on a patient.

'You can do the honours,' Daniël said to Reinjan.

Reinjan picked up a pair of scissors and carefully cut through the tape.

There they were, our own books, in neat piles of ten. We quickly ripped open the plastic packaging and each took our own copy out.

We examined the name of our publishing house, printed proudly on the cover: *Babel & Vóss Uitgevers*. We nodded approvingly when we saw our logo, the curly letters B&V on the side of the book. We read the authors' names aloud, weighed whether the book felt heavy in our hands, sniffed the pages as we flicked through the book.

'Oh no,' I burst out.

Daniël and Daan looked up.

'Look at page 101.'

I could hear pages being turned at top speed beside me.

'Fuck,' Daniël said softly.

'Shit,' Daan said.

'This can't be possible,' Daniël said. 'We're meant to stand out due to our meticulous editing.'

Then Reinjan found the page as well and saw what the three of us had already seen. In big letters, dangling at the bottom of the page, right in the middle of Jan Jaap van der Wal's argument against New Dogmatism, it said: 'Please adjust to take out or gain 1 line here.'

*We were all in agreement: we couldn't publish this. An error in our first publication, we'd never live it down, critics would write scathing reviews, the public would no longer take us seriously.*

'How can this be possible?' Daniël asked.

'Sloppy,' Reinjan said. 'Very sloppy.'

We stared at that stray sentence for a while, as if that might make it disappear.

We were all in agreement: we couldn't publish this. An error in our first publication, we'd never live it down, critics would write scathing reviews, the public would no longer take us seriously.

Feeling despondent, we slumped down behind the desk. Apart from Reinjan, who hardly seemed bothered by it. 'These things happen every now and then in the world of publishing,' he said, almost glad to be able to teach us about this aspect of the book industry already. 'This is a printer's error. You can usually ask for your money back when this sort of thing happens. But not if a former colleague printed it at a discounted rate as a favour.'

We spent the rest of the afternoon leafing through our book. We found other errors too. Some hyphens were wrong, a word or two had disappeared, here and there a capital letter or full stop was missing.

'This can't be possible,' Daniël repeated.

‘We’ll reprint it,’ Reinjan said: a decision that only he was able to make, seeing as he was the one who’d be paying for it. ‘And perhaps then we should take out an advert.’ He smiled. I could see the childhood dream of success bubbling to the surface in his eyes. ‘A whole page in *Vrij Nederland* or *De Groene Amsterdammer*. And we’ll write, “First book from Babel & Voss. With Arie Boomsma, Arnon Grunberg and many others.” His eyes sparkled. ‘And above it, we’ll put, “Already in its second edition.”’

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That advert never materialized, but a corrected version of *What We Can Do Without* appeared a few days later. We held a book launch at Studio/K in Amsterdam, which was a sell-out event. There were readings, drinks, people wandered around in the *What We Can Do Without* T-shirts we’d made especially, and hundreds of copies were sold in the first few weeks.

‘Very good for a first book,’ said Reinjan, who’d since had thousands of business cards printed for everyone. ‘Every publishing house has business cards. You can hand them out wherever you go.’ Once I started working there officially, I also received a thousand of them: *Thomas Heerma van Voss, Babel & Voss — editor*.

I got a former fellow student to create a free website for the publishing house, which was more functional than inviting, but it sufficed. I also took care of accounts on Twitter and Facebook. ‘From now on, you’re not only going to be in charge of the manuscripts, you’re also social media director,’ Reinjan said.

*On Facebook I sent friendship requests to hundreds of strangers on behalf of Babel & Voss at such high speed that the account was removed within a week*

I started following thousands of people on Twitter in the hope that they’d follow me back and see the updates from the publishing house. On Facebook I sent friendship requests to hundreds of strangers on behalf of Babel & Voss at such high speed that the account was removed within

a week: ‘Facebook users only want to be friends with people and not companies or brands. For this reason, your account has been blocked with immediate effect. Kind regards, the Facebook team.’ I didn’t let it deter me and quickly created a fan page, which people had to ‘like’ of their own accord — which virtually no one did. Our eighty fans were a stark contrast to the thousands of friends we’d had just the day before.

Sometimes, Daniël and Reinjan would email to ask if I’d like to post something on the online accounts. ‘Press release in *Trouw* about our new book, read the contribution by @arieboomsma in *What We Can Do Without* here.’

I always did exactly what they suggested, even though I never knew what else to post. Apart from Daniël’s mother, hardly anyone ever responded.

Fortunately the publishing house got enough attention in other ways. *What We Can Do Without* was featured in a number of newspapers and journals, and because we were new and just starting up, the four of us were interviewed by the *Volkskrant* as a ‘new initiative’. I can’t remember much about the discussion now, apart from the fact that the interviewer frequently used the words ‘ambitious’, ‘fresh’ and ‘ahead of the times’.

They also wanted to take a photo of us. At the request of the photographer, we went and stood beside each other on a bridge in central Amsterdam. Every once in a while, when I’m least expecting it, I stumble across this photo online. It always strikes me how young we all seem and how smart Reinjan, Daniël and Daan look in their shirts, jackets and smart trousers. I look out of place there in my jeans and baggy T-shirt, with my expectant expression. The expression of someone who doesn’t know what’s going to happen but is thinking: it’s going to be a blast.

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A year passed. The meetings continued, we gained a couple of hundred followers on Twitter, and in 2011 Babel & Voss published three new titles. In particular, our translation of *Stillness of the Sea* by the German author Nicol Ljubic received a lot of positive attention.

However, even if you tried to see the positive, it was ultimately extremely difficult to sell our books. The biggest difficulty, I discovered, involved making a new title visible. Not by means of media attention or reviews, no, I’m referring to the visibility of the physical book. Often, minimal numbers of Babel & Voss’s titles were purchased, regardless of how enthusiastically we promoted them. And it soon transpired that our publishing house wasn’t alone in this regard. I was always hearing, and still hear today, stories of declining sales figures, at big publishing

houses too — stories about authors who, after working for years, only ended up with a couple of hundred books in the shops. Now and then even a title that had been announced in a prospectus full of overblown adjectives didn't end up getting published, because the publisher deemed the response from the book industry insufficient.

Our books were mainly sold at independent bookshops. They stayed there for a month, two at most. Big chains also stocked our titles, but to our disappointment they never stacked them up; usually one or two copies ended up in one of their bookcases somewhere. They found it too risky: an unknown title from a small publishing house.

It was all perfectly understandable, but it made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to break the deadlock. If customers weren't seeing our books in the shops, they weren't going to decide to buy them online either. They'd rather buy a work that was available in the shops. And as a result, the shops themselves saw no reason to order our titles. And why would they, if no one asked about them and their competitors were hardly selling any of them? How could we ever break through this system, how could we make a novel like *Stillness of the Sea* visible to the public?

In the meantime, I'd been learning about the importance of written reviews at university. A man who, according to the University of Amsterdam's website, had spent years specializing in 'canonization processes', explained how a novel can only continue to exist if it's referred to in review papers and anthologies. And what the review papers say depends on what critics write in the newspapers. No reviews means no recognition, no recognition means no literary awards, and no awards means no place in the canon.

I nodded along to everything the man said and even passed the course with an 8, mainly by simply reproducing what he'd said during his lectures in my exams. But even while I was writing down my answers, I was thinking to myself: What on earth's the point of media attention if the book in question remains invisible, and doesn't become anything more for the general public than a title in a newspaper, a cover you never see in the shops?

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What was the impact of a good review? Or of the author's visit we'd organized for Ljubic? On the same weekend in which a prominent interview with him had been published in a national paper, including a full-page photo,

and he'd received rave reviews in various magazines, a total of nine copies of his book were ordered. It was the best day of sales we had that year.

Nine copies. I suspect it would have been more effective if we'd gone and stood somewhere on the Kalverstraat one afternoon and tried to sell books to passers-by at random.

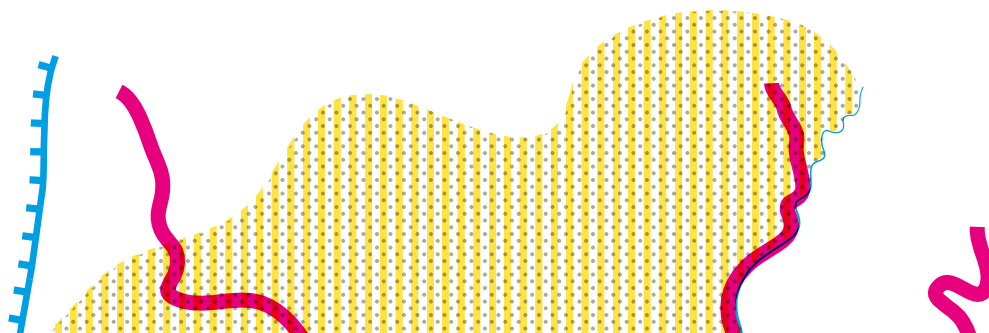
And yes, it was disappointing. We couldn't understand why our books weren't selling, but we were happy to carry on regardless. For years on end. Regardless of how few books we sold, how our titles struggled, our fortnightly meetings remained pleasant and good-humoured. This was perhaps one of Reinjan's most striking characteristics, something I observed with wonder and increasing envy: his ability to face setbacks with the same smile he'd had on his face when he'd been dreaming aloud of something great weeks before. As if everything contained a hidden message that only he was able to decipher.

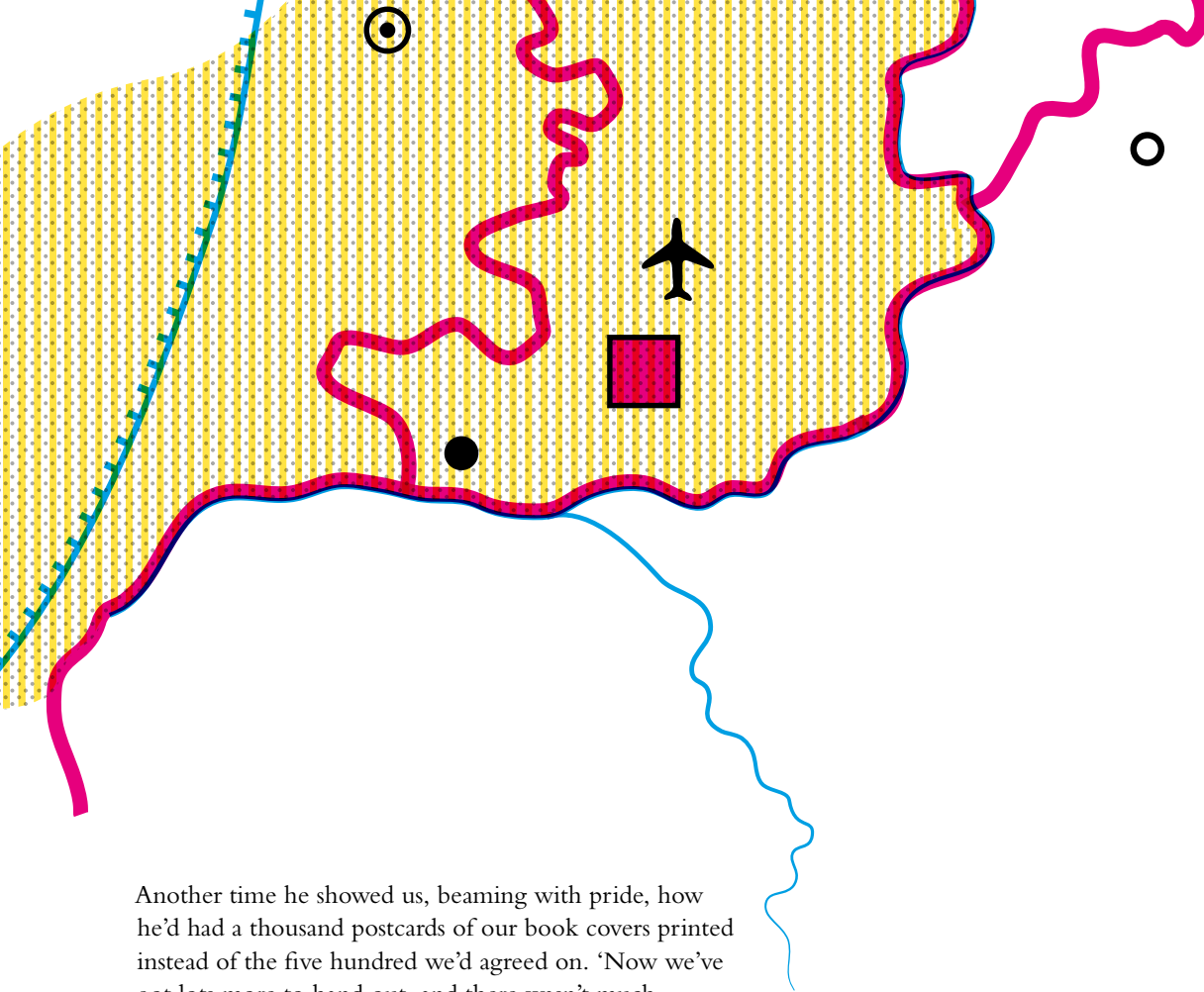
One time, he started a meeting by saying, 'I've got some very good news.'

*How can you measure the importance of your own books if it's not reflected in sales figures? And how long can you continue attaching value to that self-deemed importance if so few others see it too?*

Daniël and I jumped to our feet.

'Paul Witteman wants to be my Facebook friend,' Reinjan said. 'That won't be all he wants, not right after we've just published an important book.'





Another time he showed us, beaming with pride, how he'd had a thousand postcards of our book covers printed instead of the five hundred we'd agreed on. 'Now we've got lots more to hand out, and there wasn't much difference in terms of cost. So we'll be making a profit almost immediately.'

Sometimes, sitting in our building in the Wallen, I'd feel as if I'd ended up in an Elsschot story. Then, from nowhere, Reinjan would turn to me and ask, 'Have you got anything new, a scoop, a big talent, something that'll be a breakthrough for us?'

I'd shake my head, which never seemed to disappoint him for one moment, and he'd then start telling me with great bravura about his own plans, which he must have already known were completely unattainable. He'd mention a Dutch author who, so he said, wanted to write a book for us — and who never did — or speak of publishing successes from his past that he believed we could repeat.

And still, regardless of how unfounded his optimism, his talent regularly came to the fore during those meetings. I saw the powers of persuasion he must have previously used to attract big authors, the enthusiasm with which he spurred others on, the sharpness with which he was able to produce full books from anecdotes and stories he'd heard down the pub. But at Babel & Voss I also saw the extent to which the publishing world had changed in recent years. Powers of persuasion, enthusiasm and sharpness alone would no longer get you very far.

This is the only era I've ever known; for as long as I've been writing, there's been talk of a crisis. Reinjan made me realize that the book world had been different before. His expectation was that each title would sell about a

thousand copies, and he'd only start counting after that. After every review he'd expect a clear impact on sales. That's how it had worked for decades. But the rules of the game had changed. People used to think in terms of cause and effect: if an author received X amount of attention, they'd sell at least Y number of books. There was logic in it. Like expecting success after having worked hard, the way a farmer can expect rain if his land has dried out, because everyone knows that sooner or later the weather's going to change.

Those fundamental principles no longer exist. In total, Babel & Voss published eight books over the course of four years, and each copy sold required a lot of work. I still remember a meeting when Reinjan was looking at our annual financial overview, which was completely in the red, and pondered, 'We could say: that bestseller will come, one of these days. We could also say: the books we publish are so important that they simply have to be made, so it doesn't matter if anyone buys them or not.'

No one said anything for some time.

Then Daniël asked, 'But how many important books are there that no one buys?'

Without our realizing it right then, that was the key question, a dilemma we thought about as our efforts for Babel & Voss increased. How can you measure the importance of your own books if it's not reflected in sales figures? And how long can you continue attaching value to that self-deemed importance if so few others see it too?



During the Small Publishers' Fair, I saw increasing numbers of independent publishers reaching out to the general public. We did it too. But *Real Farmer Wants a Real Wife*, the book we published about the TV programme *Farmer Wants a Wife*, which we expected to become a big success, didn't do any better than our less accessible titles.

What were we doing wrong, which other strategies could we apply?

It didn't make any difference when we decided to halve the price of all our books either, to ten euros. That had been Daniël's idea: according to him, books shouldn't cost more than a tenner these days. But even after lowering our prices, the bestseller list still featured the same books as the weeks before, big names at big publishing houses, at twice the price of our titles.

It makes sense that nothing changed. If people don't see a book in the shop, they're not going to notice it if it suddenly becomes a lot cheaper either.

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Would it essentially have made any difference, one bestseller? I doubt it. A handy arrangement with the District Council of East Amsterdam meant that our collection of stories *East* (2012) ultimately became our only really profitable title, but none of us benefited from it. We'd already made too great a loss on our other titles for that.

All in all, the publishing house must have cost Reinjan a fortune; from start to end, he was the one who paid for everything, but he never mentioned it. He only spoke about the future. About new authors, new proposals, new titles. He sometimes forwarded manuscripts to me that former colleagues or vague acquaintances had sent him, in which I spotted spelling mistakes in the first sentence or the cover letter. Reinjan must have noticed them too, but he always wrote in all seriousness, 'Have a look and see if this could perhaps become our next publication.'

At other times, he sent me emails without any attachments that just contained the words, 'Any other interesting submissions, scoops? In haste, Reinjan.'

In 2012, we published three books, none of which were picked up, not even after Reinjan placed large adverts in weekly papers.

Then we discovered Gert Boel. A young Flemish author who wanted to write a big debut novel, the type of book the publishing house had been designed for in the first place. Daniël came up with the idea one day. The three of us were convinced at once, fantasized about him appealing

to a wide audience, and Reinjan immediately drew up a contract, including a generous advance.

Boel travelled to Amsterdam to sign it. He was a tall, skinny guy with curly hair and a downy beard. He used the formal form of 'you' to address us and told us at length and in great detail about his novel-to-be. It was an interesting but rather complex story, if I remember rightly, about a private detective living in Ghent who travels to Budapest for love. Boel said, 'I've got it all in my head. I just need to write it down.'

Afterwards, we signed his contract in our office. The moment had something very solemn about it. We shook hands, smiled and even drank champagne, the way they did at big publishing houses. One of the freelancers in our office took a photo, which has been online ever since. Until now, it's the only concrete evidence of us having worked with Gert Boel: Daniël, Reinjan and I, each holding a glass of champagne, standing triumphantly beside our own author.

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By then, thousands of copies of our books were in storage at the national distribution centre, and the stocks were decreasing excruciatingly slowly. Of the eight books we published in five years, *What We Can Do Without* remained one of our most popular titles. With the later publications, we ended up asking ourselves more and more often: how are we ever going to get rid of these hundreds of copies?

Reinjan must have also noticed what we all noticed: that our ambitions were slowly evaporating and that it seemed as if the publishing house was fading away.

*In order to stay alive, a publisher  
hardly has to pay anything. It's  
only if you want to do more than  
exist that it costs money.*

We announced Boel's book, obviously lacking inspiration, under the title *The Novel*. When it was put up for sale,

eleven copies of *The Novel* were ordered, by all the bookshops in the Netherlands and Belgium put together. 'It's the lowest number I've ever encountered,' Reinjan said. 'What's going on? The champagne photo had more than a hundred likes on Facebook — that was our record. Where have all those fans gone?'

In the meantime, Daniël was spending more and more time working on the literary journal *Das Magazin*, which he'd co-founded. 'Strange,' Reinjan said when I bumped into him one afternoon with the dog he'd just bought. It was called Milan Kundera and Reinjan took it for a long walk around the city every day. 'People in publishing circles always used to say: never start a journal, you'll only make a loss on it. But *Das Magazin* is already more profitable than all of our books have ever been.'

Perhaps, I later mused, the main advantage of *Das Magazin* was that the literary journal was a branch that had not reached its full potential. Perhaps there were simply too many publishing houses when Babel & Voss sprang up and it was impossible for it to stand out among its competitors.

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The last time the editorial board of Babel & Voss got together, the three of us met in a bar in West Amsterdam. We rarely went into the office in the Wallen any more. 'I always liked it there,' Reinjan said, 'for doing my own things too. But it's not possible now I've got Milan. As soon as I arrive, I have to go home again to let him out.'

As usual, we started by discussing how our titles were struggling, then I said 'no' about the manuscripts we'd received, and we finished off with future plans.

There was a moment of silence.

And then, as if they'd planned it in advance, Daniël and Reinjan said that we shouldn't make any new books for the time being — without a discussion, without any hard feelings, without any regrets or remorse.

It was a factual announcement: no new prospectuses, no more Small Publishers' Fairs, no fortnightly meetings.

We bade each other farewell without exchanging a word. Daniël went back to the *Das Magazin* office, Reinjan rushed home to his dog, and I cycled home, with no idea what I should do with all the free time I suddenly had.

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Half a year later, a piece about Babel & Voss appeared in the literary journal *Ons Erfdeel*. It described in detail the early days of the publishing house, Reinjan's dream, the ways in which we wanted to stand out, the setbacks we

encountered, our futile attempts to get books in shops. The piece contained all sorts of details an outsider couldn't possibly know, details about sales figures and conversations that had taken place behind closed doors. It wasn't strange, because I'd written it myself.

I'd been wary of sending my text to Daniël, and above all to Reinjan. Daniël responded within half an hour of my sending it to him. 'Nice one, mate,' was all he wrote.

Reinjan's response followed shortly thereafter. 'A shot in the arm,' he emailed. 'Now Babel & Voss hasn't been in vain. It's been recorded. It's got a place in history. PS: A good bit of advance publicity for Gert Boel's novel as well, and yes, I'm an optimist.'

He phoned me the same day. He wanted to use my article, in extended form, to make a pamphlet. 'Our fifth anniversary is coming up,' he said. 'I think it would be perfectly suited for a celebratory publication. At last, an anniversary publication that doesn't have success stories in it, as a sign of life.'

His voice sounded so full of hope I could only agree.

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Soon after, Reinjan and I met up in 't Loosje on the Nieuwmarkt. 'Babel & Voss will continue to exist,' he said at once. 'As long as we want it to.'

He went on to talk about 'the manuscript'. It took a while for me to realize that he was referring to my article for *Ons Erfdeel*. Reinjan took dozens of pamphlets out of a bag and showed them to me. 'Look,' he said. 'A.F.Th., Thomése, Grunberg, Mutsaers, they've all had publications with small publishing houses. Which one do you like best?'

I flicked through them and picked one out.

'We'll make something like that then. As a special festive promotion. And before I forget: I want to make at most two thousand euros' loss on this title.'

Evidently, it was already clear that he'd make a loss, the only question was how much.

Before I arrived home that afternoon, I received a lengthy email with words like 'ISBN' and 'royalty percentage' in it. Reinjan had also emailed several bookshops, and wanted to know if I wanted a publication without illustrations? With flaps, or a hardcover?

For the first time in ages, Reinjan was back in his role again. Finally, something was happening at Babel & Voss once more, the machine was turning — like an engine that briefly starts up again after you've been stuck for hours on



the motorway, so long you no longer know if you're still waiting for help or just thinking: forget it, it's fine.

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In the autumn of 2014, the freelancers with whom we'd shared a floor in the office in the Wallen organized a leaving party for Reinjan. He'd carried on paying rent for a fair while, long after we'd stopped publishing books and even after he'd got Milan Kundera and hardly ever went to the office any more.

It was a sunny Friday afternoon. The table where the three of us used to meet was full of someone else's papers. There were bowls containing slices of cucumber; people were drinking glasses of wine or beer from half-litre cans. I knew virtually no one and was by far the youngest there. Without being asked, Reinjan introduced me to everyone: 'This is Thomas. He's going to be writing our anniversary book.' I also heard him say, 'This is the man who's going to immortalize the office.'

A woman with a German accent gave a speech. I was standing at the back and had trouble following what she was saying. After a while she said, 'Books were made here and, above all, a lot of talking about books took place here.'

There was applause.

Then Reinjan spoke. Halfway through his speech he said something I knew I'd never forget, one sentence which probably summed up the whole history of Babel & Voss. 'I'd finally achieved everything I'd wanted in my life, and then I got the dog.'

More applause, louder this time.

I clapped along, but was one of the first to leave. I found it difficult to be in this room, knowing that Babel & Voss wasn't based there any more. I quickly shook hands with Daniël and Reinjan and left the room. Down those creaky stairs in the Wallen one last time, 'We don't dispense methadone' one last time. I knew I'd never go back there. But that I'd still miss the place.

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If people ask me about the current status of Babel & Voss, I mainly find it embarrassing. As if they're reminding me of a romance that fizzled out without it being clear how or why. I usually smile a bit. Sometimes I repeat what Reinjan said. That the publishing house will continue to exist as long as we want it to.

I keep it to myself that it's alive like a comatose patient who doesn't have any friends or family around them: no one who would notice if they opened their eyes again after so many years.

It's now been about a year since our last book was published. It remains to be seen whether or not anything else will be published after this piece. It's my understanding that there are no plans to do so. We haven't heard anything from Gert Boel for months. According to Daniël, he's still writing an ever-expanding novel. 'He's going to send me some fragments again soon. One day it will turn into something big.'

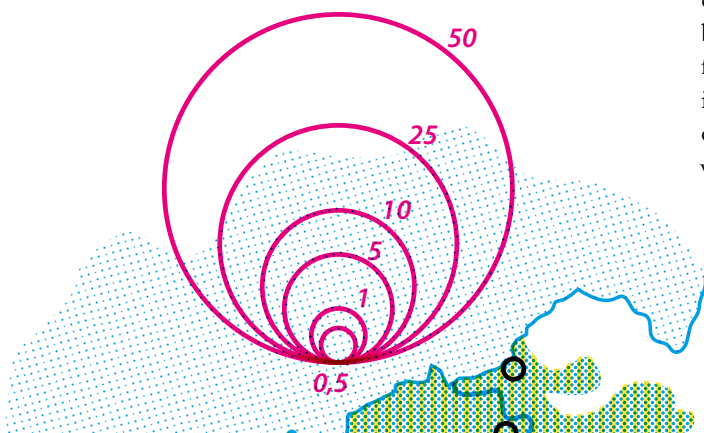
Funnily enough, the old titles are selling just as well now as they were a year ago — not a lot, but we still receive orders every week. And apart from storage at the national distribution centre, there are hardly any fixed costs.

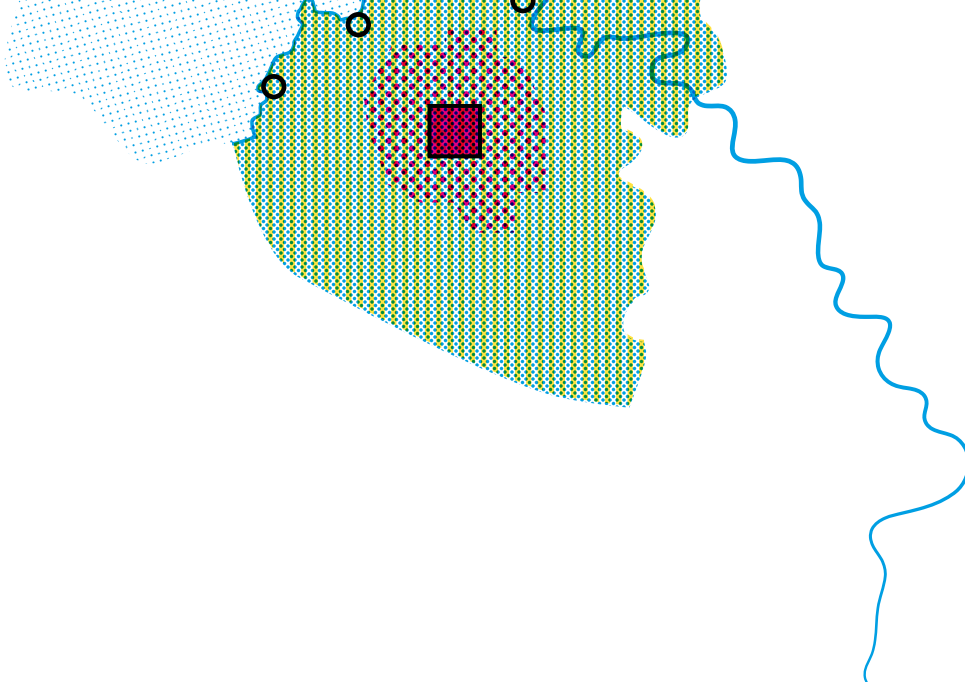
In order to stay alive, a publisher hardly has to pay anything. It's only if you want to do more than exist that it costs money.

What remains is a collection of memories. Of that winter's afternoon that Daniël and I travelled to Groningen to launch the novel by Vamba Sherif that went virtually unnoticed; of Nicol Ljubic's upper arms, of course; of all the times I walked past the medical centre and up the stairs to our office; of the photo session on a bridge; of drinking champagne with a Fleming I didn't know.

There's still a Facebook account with a few hundred followers, to which Reinjan posts something every now and then. There are two editions of *What We Can Do Without* in my bookcase; virtually no one knows that the difference can be found on page 101. There's an undiminished pile of cards on my desk. *Thomas Heerma van Voss, Babel & Voss* — editor. I haven't given out a single one all these years.

Nevertheless, the publishing house still exists. Reinjan's dream is still alive. It's now spread out over hundreds of bookcases in Dutch households; traces of it can still be found in certain bookshops — not in piles by the till, but in one of the bookcases, squeezed between hundreds of other titles. If you look closely you'll still see our logo, very small, right at the bottom: the curly letters B&V. ♦





FICTION

# A Small Planet

By Maartje Wortel

Translated from the Dutch by Michele Hutchison

**Y**ou moved into your own flat. You went to a shop with your mum and dad and bought a desk to study at. The desk has got three drawers. For a while, the bottom two drawers stay empty until you've amassed an increasing amount of stuff. Key rings, passport photos, receipts and paracetamol. When you move house, you move the stuff with you. Beneath a few notebooks and rubber bands, there's a letter from a former lover. You no longer see each other.

You miss someone who moved abroad. Sometimes you get up with that feeling. You're tired of the space between your two bodies. The presence of an absence. It was already like that, but the space used to be smaller, more manageable. You bridged it by walking or cycling. Now you think about the hole between yourself and death, which you are hoping is endless. If it's up to you, it will be a landscape, a desert perhaps.

You used to spend entire summer holidays listening to Bert & Ernie cassette tapes. You'd sit on a wooden swing and listen to Bert & Ernie singing: *It's a mess, mess, terrible mess; we haven't tidied up in a long time. Mess, mess, everything's lost; we haven't tidied up in a long time. La la la la la, la la la la!* There are people who are constantly tidying up. They put all their stuff away behind closed doors. If everyone displayed everything, no one would sing any more.

You're in a study with large windows. There's a bed someone put there. Someone who believes in the importance of doing nothing. Someone who thinks that looking is better than living. Someone who says: Reality is what you are capable of. You lie on your back on the bed and look up at the sky. Twelve swans fly past the window and you think about the journey of thousands of miles they've made through the sky and that if one of the swans gets ill, there's always another swan who lands with him or her. They wait together on the ground until the sick swan is well enough to set off again.

You saw a piece by Marlene Dumas in the Stedelijk Museum that stuck in your mind. It's called *Don't Talk to Strangers* (1977). It's a collage on canvas with sticky tape and fragments of letters from friends and lovers that the artist collected. She's cut out just the beginnings and the endings of the letters. You think it's a large canvas, maybe four feet wide, you've never been good at estimating size. On the left-hand side of the piece, the salutations have been placed in a vertical row, in different types of handwriting. At the right-hand side are all the signings-off. One person ended their letter with a cloud of crossings-out. Or perhaps it's more like a lump of crossings-out. It's somebody who changed their mind while signing off. On second thoughts, better not. After the crossings-out, the letter writer closes with: *Zzzzz*.

Between the second and third z, another z has been added later. So now it actually says Zzzzzz, which completely changes the meaning, causing you to have to change your opinion of it. Causing you to want to lie next to that person. Causing you never to forget this.

*When you move house, you move the stuff with you. Beneath a few notebooks and rubber bands, there's a letter from a former lover. You no longer see each other.*



In a book written by K. Schippers you read: 'Once a female dancer has dressed again afterwards, her body is no longer erotic. I experienced this in a dressing room once. The nakedness is between the dance and what comes next, talking, drinking. It isn't trying to mean anything in those empty moments.'

You text this to a friend. You hope she'll recognize herself in those empty moments. You wait for a reply. You type a new text: What I meant to say is that freedom and maybe even happiness are almost always to be found between two meaningful moments.

A lecturer from the Rietveld Academy once told me that when you cook a meal for friends and are busy making it, there's always a moment when everything's ready. Your friends have yet to arrive. You sit at the laid table and wait. That's the crucial moment.

A friend gave you a bulletproof vest. He travels to war zones sometimes. Now he's got the very latest model. One day there'll be no one left to kill. He'd put the old vest on eBay, but the police made him take it down. Now you can have the vest for your birthday. You say: A bulletproof vest. He says: Bulletproof isn't the right word. It is bullet-resistant.

When all the party guests have left and you've eaten the last bit of birthday cake with both hands, all restraint gone, you undress. You're completely naked. Your nipples become hard, even though it's not cold. You pull your vest on over your head; this is what a tortoise must feel like, you think. You doubt it's sexy. You walk over to the mirror in the bedroom. Your bare feet on the carpet.

You notice your legs look skinnier when you're wearing a carapace. You look in the mirror, hold out both arms. You form a gun with your hands. You fire a bullet.

You watch the Werner Herzog documentary *Encounters at the End of the World*. The camera follows a penguin colony. They walk in a lone line towards the sea. One of the penguins separates itself from the group and walks the other way, towards the mountains. The penguin walks alone for miles and miles through a landscape that has nothing to offer him; he walks straight towards death. You'd want to be that penguin. Later you're with your friends in front of a bar, unlocking your bikes. You say: It's so lovely, all of us being here together. At the same time. Us together. The others look at you. They say that perhaps you should go to bed. You don't have a good reply to this. All the bike locks are open now. Your friends cycle off and you cycle to the other side of the city. At home you fall asleep with tears in your eyes, in such a way that you can barely open your eyes the next day. You shouldn't have made such a fool, a drunken fool, of yourself.

You make a few dates to fill your diary. Then you cancel the dates; you've bought your own freedom, fought for your time. You didn't have to do anything for it. It doesn't make you feel any better though.

You read something about David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* on a newspaper's website. Twenty years on, *Twin Peaks* is making a comeback, just as Lynch had announced at the end of the series. Not long later, Lynch pulls out of the project. He hasn't been given enough money to turn *Twin Peaks* into the series he wants to make. All the actors from *Twin Peaks* make a short film in support of Lynch. They ask the station to invest more. No Lynch without Lynch. They say things like: *Twin Peaks* without David Lynch is like a doughnut without a hole. You think about the hole in a doughnut. Is a hole without a doughnut a hole? A doughnut without a hole a doughnut? And then you think about *Twin Peaks* again. You watch the film from beginning to end and then play it again. You're really shocked. All those beautiful actors and actresses — Sheryl Lee, Sherilyn Fenn, Kyle MacLachlan — have become old, fathers and mothers. Men and women longing for the past. You'd forgotten for a moment that this is how life goes, everything is lost. Even David Lynch's world. He wrote a book about making films and art, about the creative process. The book is called *Catching the Big Fish*. In one of the chapters he writes: 'The mind tricks itself to escape some horror.'

You cycle through a wood on an island, a sandbank in the sea, and you need to pee. It's half past four in the morning. This darkness is new to you, it doesn't exist in the city. On your way home, you see traffic lights, a crossroads and the lights of the apartment blocks and car headlights.

Always the same. You cycle and the wind — it doesn't matter which way it is blowing, the wind always comes off the sea here — glides across your bare arms, through your hair. You can hear your coat flapping in the wind, like a sail. You've just come from a party in a hotel room. The music was quiet. You didn't know anyone, you just ended up there. You still need to pee, but call a friend. He doesn't answer, he's already asleep. You know exactly what that looks like: he's lying on his side; his lips are pursed, as though he is kissing the air in his sleep. I'm calling you, you say, just to say I can be alone. But only because I'm not alone. Then you see the lights of the holiday park. You know you can hang up now.

You've got a biscuit tin filled with undeveloped rolls of film. One Tuesday morning, you get up, the week has already begun, you take the rolls to a printing shop. You want to experience what it was like. The shop smells of rat poison. You say you'd like to have the films developed. The man behind the counter tells you it will take a fortnight. You say: I'm in no rush. When you get home, you tidy up. Everything has to be made ready for a return. When you look at the photos you are so recognizable, it's unfathomable how you've grown in the meantime.

*You listen to a piece of music being played by a small orchestra over your headphones. You hear the violinist breathe, it's as though he is blowing. Soon he'll become inaudible, both his blowing and the violin.*

You've got one female friend who asked to be friends with you. She sat next to you on the arm of a sofa. Someone had introduced the two of you in order to shrug both of you off. You'd chatted for a while and she'd asked: Will you be friends with me? Generally you're not interested, you've got enough friends. If you had to take care of all of these people when all hell broke loose, either you'd have no time left or you wouldn't be a good friend. But you hear yourself saying: Okay. You mean it. Even though the friend said later, because now you were friends of course, that you were too judgemental of people. That's not nice, you said. Lots of things aren't nice, you thought.

But you held your tongue. You even said you'd pay attention to that in the future. You were in the dunes together. She'd watched you as you walked along that endless Dutch beach, headed towards the sea. They all know you want to swim, she'd said. You'd come back to eat nuts and drink wine with her in the dunes. She'd said she loved you and you'd said: I love you too. Later you'd gone to Berlin together. In a pub with red furniture she'd asked you whether you were sure you didn't want children. You shook your head. You didn't want to be judgemental about people who did want children, but then she couldn't judge you either. You didn't think it was fair, children. She thought it was a pity because she'd have liked to share motherhood with you. She said in that case you should share something else instead. She offered you a cigarette. You both went outside and she lit your cigarette and then hers too. You took two short drags and thought about something a lung specialist had said on Radio 1, that she'd seen people drown in their own blood. You gave your still-lit cigarette to a young tramp who happened to walk by. He thanked you as though you'd just borne him a child. You wanted to add: Don't drown in your own blood.

You listen to a piece of music being played by a small orchestra over your headphones. You hear the violinist breathe, it's as though he is blowing. Soon he'll become inaudible, both his blowing and the violin. You're listening to a concert in which more and more instruments drop away. At first the orchestra begins to play the piece as it should be. It sounds lavish and lovely. At a certain point, after playing for a few minutes, first one and then the next musician stops. First the violin stops. The man puts down his violin, gets up and leaves the stage; you can hear him doing this. After this, the rest follow. At the end of the piece there's just a timpanist left. All you hear is boom-boom-boom, like the familiar beating of your heart. It makes you cry and wait for someone to lay their big hands over your eyes.

You sit in your study. You know what's going to happen next. ◊



FOUR POEMS

# Mustafa Stitou

Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer

I have two half faces.  
Two half faces.

Do what your Father says,  
says the keyring,  
and you will be safe.

And the empty snail's shell?  
The mouldy bread?  
The box of condoms?

The rat poison? The weeping  
party mask on the wall?

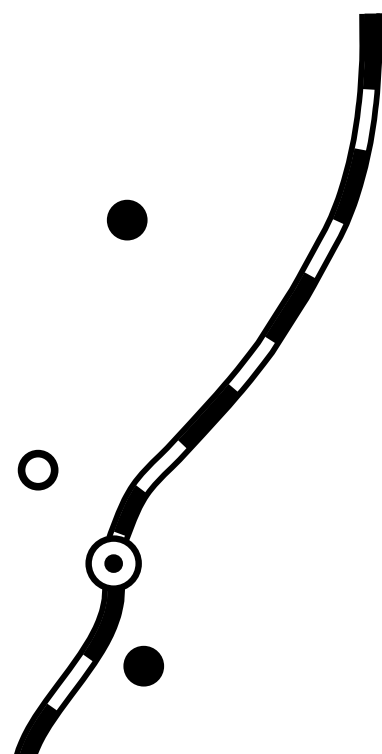
The glowing orange  
on the sideboard?  
The Unbreakable brand  
comb? The gloves  
she forgot in her rush?

Two half faces.

And the mistrust  
in my twinkling eyes?  
As strong as the impulse  
to refuse all  
responsibility!

The keyring says:  
Do what your Father says  
and you will be safe.

But the snail's shell  
echoes the god of joy  
(and freedom):  
Forget the difference  
and you will find identity.



## Clerks

The Roman Catholic Church intends  
to do away with limbo,  
I read in the newspaper.

The section of limbo  
that accommodates the souls  
of stillborn babies and unbaptized infants.

An alighting crow reminds  
me of the remains found up the street:  
lower body, tattoos included, fairly intact;

upper body unidentifiable,  
head and chest deep black and riddled  
with maggots (high on cocaine).

Of all birds it's mainly crows  
that make me feel there is another creature,  
most probably a human, trapped inside a bird.

Another part of limbo accommodates  
virtuous but unbaptized fellows like Moses  
and Plato, Homer and Abraham.

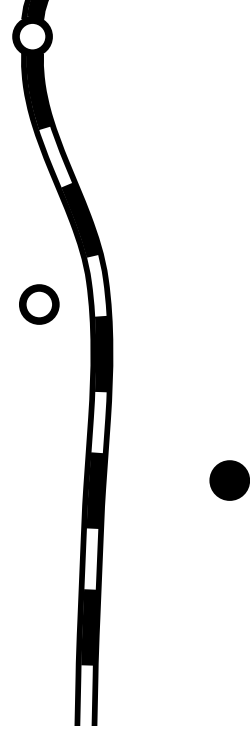
It is not in the sense of reincarnation  
that I believe that another creature,  
most probably a human, is trapped inside a bird;

it's not some pet theory of mine,  
but a feeling in the face of which  
I am defenceless.

It's to negate the competitive advantage of Islam,  
particularly in Africa, where infant mortality is high  
(according to Islam dead children go straight to heaven)

that the Church wants to abolish limbo.  
I toss the crow a grape, other crows descend  
and in no time I am surrounded

by crows scoffing grapes. By people  
trapped in crows scoffing grapes.  
Clerks of the early to mid twentieth century.





### Confession of Faith

On leaving the bar I heard  
a painter say that astronauts  
often grew up without a father.

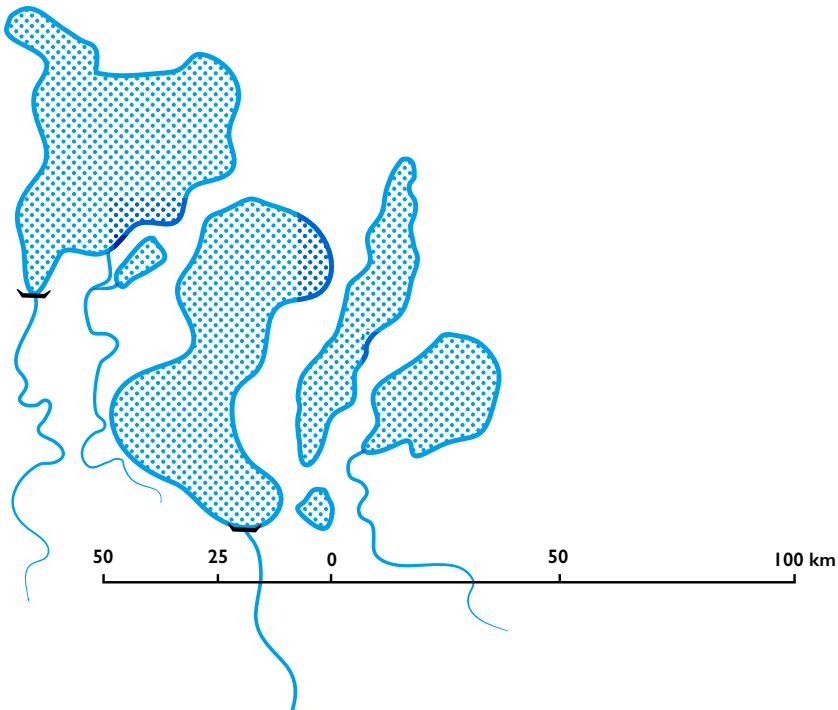
I repeat: on leaving the bar  
I heard a painter say that astronauts  
often grew up without a father.

The same with prophets, I thought.  
Muhammad, amongst others, grew up  
without a father. On the way

home, it was night-time, taking  
the shortcut through the park, I heard  
a squirrel say your death will be

the first real thing to happen to you.  
I repeat: your death will be the first  
real thing to happen to you. If that is true,

I thought, then squirrels sometimes speak  
the truth. I repeat: then squirrels  
sometimes speak the truth.





## Orchids

1

There are orchids that form  
a more or less exact copy  
of a female fly, wasp or bee.

The males zoom in  
and try to mate with them —  
pollinating the flower in the process.

2 *Two quotes, from the first and twenty-first centuries*

Nature  
the umbilical cord  
has appointed us  
wrapped itself  
to be neither base nor ignoble

twice  
but ushers us into the vast universe  
around his neck  
to be spectators of the mighty whole  
pulling against  
and keen aspirants for honour  
his tiny throat

implanting in our souls  
strangling him  
unconquerable love  
as he  
for the elevated and divine  
was born.

3

An ex, the spitting image of Mother,  
told me about a doctor  
and the small collection of foetuses  
he wanted to be buried with —  
according to his wife, his faculties  
were declining rapidly.

The word became fertile,  
so goes a Maori legend,  
slept with twilight  
and gave birth to night, the night  
that ends in death.

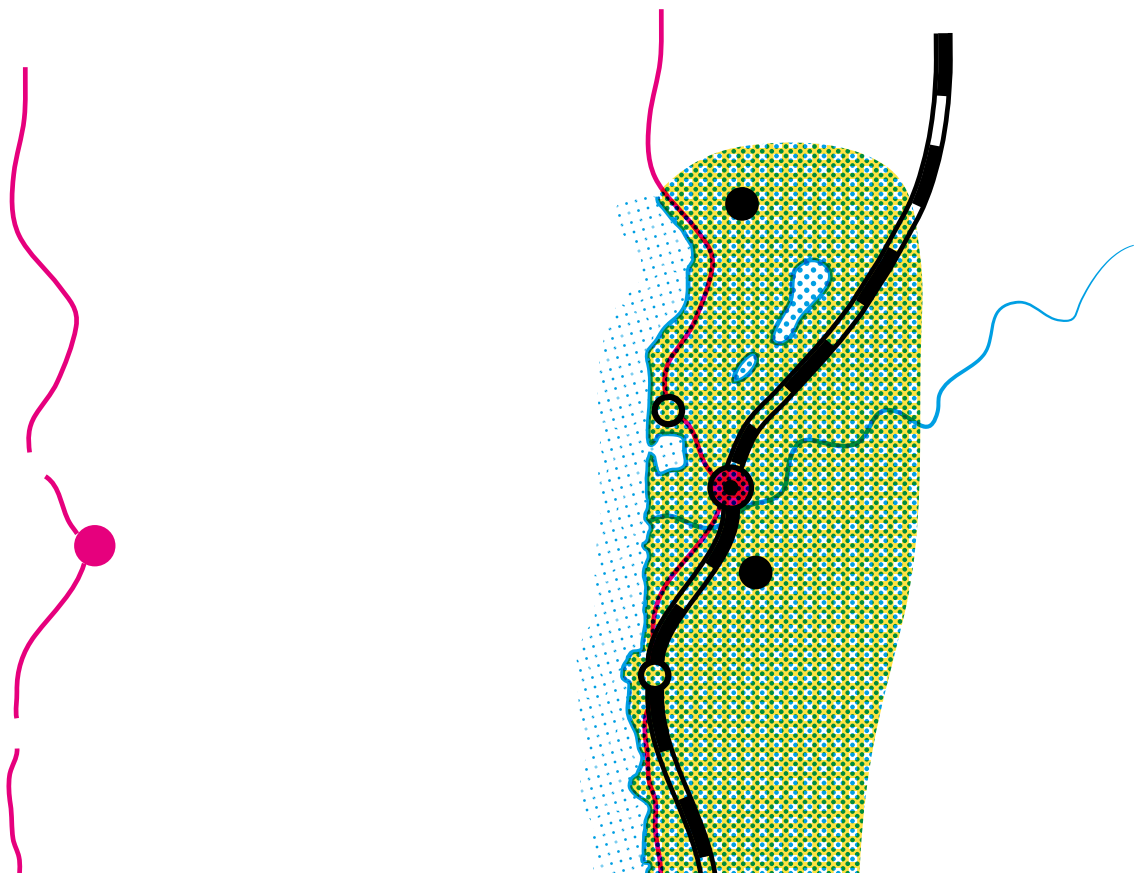
Five foetuses. The priest  
wasn't having it — those foetuses  
weren't even baptized — but  
he didn't return the jars.

Strange that in creation myths  
the god who falls to creating  
is invariably surrounded by something else:  
other gods for instance, chaos,  
eggshell, primeval soup, the infinite.  
It's already started before it starts.

Several days after the funeral, the wife  
saw freshly turned earth outside  
the cemetery gate and concluded  
that was where the priest had buried  
the foetuses. Myth

trips along behind 'nature'.  
Theology shuffles behind 'nature'.  
Philosophy trudges behind 'nature'.  
And science?

I associate Mother with trees.  
Sometimes, looking at her,  
I get the feeling, the idea  
that she's a tree. I had it with this ex  
too, though to a lesser degree.





FICTION

# Walking Urge

By Thijs de Boer

Translated from the Dutch by Liz Waters

The corridors in this building begin again even before they've ended. They're circles.

This building used to be a care home for the senile elderly. And the corridors run in circles because some of those old folk had the uncontrollable compulsion to walk. Nurses call it *walking urge*.

The corridors run in circles because none of the nurses wanted to stand at the end of a corridor all the time to explain to all those old people that this is the end.

You can't go any further. This is the end.

There is no more.

The corridors run in circles so that those old people could walk around and around until they died.

In this building they ask you: 'Can you fall asleep on your back?'

They ask you: 'Do you often see something out of the corner of your eye that later turns out not to be there?'

This building used to be one of the best places in the country to bring your senile father or mother. But the home went bankrupt, because no one wanted to pay so much money for the people who brought them into this world.

And now *we* sleep here.

Sometimes a midget runs round and round the corridors shouting: 'Look, the dwarf's running! Look, the dwarf's running! Look at his funny little arms and legs! Look at how they move! Look at how they move!'

This is before he's given a shot.

Almost all the light switches in the building don't work. Almost all the lights in the building are switched on and off remotely. The old, non-working light switches, standing out white everywhere against the brightly coloured walls, are a constant reminder of the fact that

we can't take care of ourselves. That we can't decide for ourselves. Can't think for ourselves.

I've heard people say that in your dreams you can never have any control over the light. And that if you want to know for sure whether or not you're dreaming, you have to try turning the light off or on.

Here, during the day, we never know for sure.

The only light we're allowed to control for ourselves is the light by the bed. Which we're allowed to switch off ourselves before going to sleep. The only moment in the day when we know for sure that we're not dreaming is just before we fall asleep. And I don't know who I say it to or why, but every evening when I turn out the light I softly say aloud 'goodnight'.

In this building they ask you: 'Do you sometimes rub your eyes hard for the beautiful colours and shapes you're going to see?'

You're permitted to hang up posters. To make your room more personal. Less empty. You're even encouraged to bring your own blankets and pillows. So that we'll feel at home. But I only use the things they give me here and the walls of my room are bare. Even after all this time I still see the present as something temporary.

They ask you: 'Do you often think someone's calling your name?'

They ask you: 'Do you think heaven is made of wood and stone?'

In this building you've got what they call the 'hummers'. These are the people who hum all day. These are the people who hear voices in their heads. People who hear voices often — when they hear the voices — tighten their vocal cords. As if they're using their vocal cords. Even though they aren't. The humming is meant to prevent this tightening and it's supposed to keep the voices away.

Making noise so you don't hear the voices.

Sometimes, when a hummer goes quiet for a while, Mira likes to start him off again.

Mira's my only friend here.

And she says that if you ask them something about their childhood, then they'll spend at least another two days humming.

Mira has tried to commit suicide three times. She came here after the third. Because of one of those suicide attempts she now has strange shoes to help her walk. She jumped off the roof of a building that was three floors high. It was a cry for help, she said.

*I've heard people say that in your dreams you can never have any control over the light.*

Three floors is a cry for help.

She says: 'You can't take anyone really seriously until at least five floors up.'

In this building they told me that what I did wasn't normal. And then they put me in here with all these crazies. But after everything that had happened, could I really have done anything else? Wasn't it simply the only normal, the only human, response?

Mira says we'll both go to hell for what we've done.

In this building they ask you: 'Do you often think someone's there with you, watching everything you do?'

Every day, at around noon, a dog comes by. He sits and waits at the sliding door until security lets him in. No one knows who the owner is. When he's let in he walks to the day room and goes and sits on the carpet by the sofas. There he sits for a couple of hours, looking around. And after that he goes away again.

If you try to give him something to eat, he won't take it unless it's in your left hand. He never eats from your right hand. His boss probably trained him like that to prevent people from spoiling him too much. But I'm left-handed. I can give him whatever I like.

—

They say it's better that we're here.

And then they ask you: 'Are you still able to cry?'

—

Sometimes when I'm bored I walk in circles around the corridors, just like those old folks used to do. And it's a great feeling. As if you're liberating yourself from denial.

But most days it's just a matter of waiting, for the day to end.

—

In this building they ask you: 'Would you now, in the same situation, do the same thing?' And I don't lie, I say 'yes' every time. And then I stay here.

—

Mira always tells me the stories she's going to tell her doctor. Things she makes up to keep him busy.

Yesterday in the day room Mira said to me: 'Doctor, I had a dream about a chess grandmaster. This chess player was so talented he was able to think more moves ahead than any other chess player. So far ahead that before he made his first move he already knew he was going to lose. The best chess player in the world, and he'll never touch a chess piece again.'

She said: 'Doctor, what do you think it means?'

She said: 'Doctor, I often find myself thinking about the dead tree that stood outside my bedroom window when I was a child. The dead tree was completely overgrown with ivy, and the ivy was blossoming. Because of the ivy the tree looked green. The tree looked alive.'

She said: 'Doctor, what do you think it means?'

Sometimes I'm afraid that if I start humming, Mira will go away.

—

They ask you: 'Do you often dream about hospitals?'

They ask you: 'Are you afraid of getting better?'

—

Last week I was allowed into the village without anyone with me. I sat on a kerb on the square and a man came and sat next to me. He looked like he was living on the street. And he smelled like it too.

And he said without looking at me: 'Stop brushing your teeth.'

He said: 'It's the fluoride. That's how they get you.'

I looked at him and said nothing. His legs were trembling. He said they first used fluoride in the labour camps of old Soviet Russia. He said they'd discovered that if they gave the prisoners water with fluoride in it, they stopped causing the guards any kind of trouble and you could do literally anything with them.

He said: 'The fluoride made them accept their fate.'

After that I stood up and said: 'Thank you.'

And that evening I brushed my teeth three times and each time I swallowed the toothpaste.

—

In this building they often ask you: 'Why are you here?'

—

When I'm allowed to leave here, I want to go to 85 degrees latitude north or south. And then travel westwards at a little under 145 kilometres an hour. That's the speed you need to go to compensate for the Earth's rotation. To make time stand still. I don't want to travel back in time. I just want to stand still.

Walking in circles to stop time.

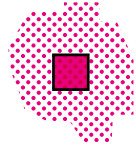
Of course you can also go to the exact North Pole. Where you just stand still and turn on your axis in twenty-four hours. But I think the stopping of time does deserve some kind of effort.

—

In this building all the walls are brightly coloured and everything you can touch has a texture. It was for the senile elderly. Bright colours, things to feel. It was to stimulate them. This building is made to jog old people's brains awake.

This building is made for remembering.

And here I am, among all these crazies. And the only thing we all have in common is that we want to forget. ♦



TWO POEMS

# Ester Naomi Perquin

Translated from the Dutch by David Colmer

## Statement

I wasn't there that night. And if I was, I didn't know. Not that they were drinking, you hear things sometimes, it's only now I realize they did something wrong.

I had no idea what was going on, anyway everyone I saw there left me out of it because I wasn't there. Not that night.

As far as that woman goes, I wouldn't know. I never knew her and if I'd known her I wouldn't have thought about her much because if a woman's a friend's, you forget her.

You forget your friends too, those guys, for instance. I've never seen them before and, because I don't know who they are, I don't know where they were that night.

But things just happen at your place and mine, in the homes of complete strangers, things happen in places you've never been to.

Maybe it was a planter. And that planter fell horizontally on her face and fairly hard and maybe more than once perhaps but people talk so much, it was a remarkably dark night.

I remember I was home in bed where I was and looking out and thinking it's not often you see such a deep black.



## Legal Activities

1

Wake them up at the start of the night and ask for dreams.

If they say they haven't had any yet because you've woken them up: slap.

If they start to cry, stroke their hair until they think of their mothers. Then say their mothers aren't coming anymore.

If they rest their heads on their arms, keep quiet for a long time. When they fall asleep, wake them up and ask for dreams.

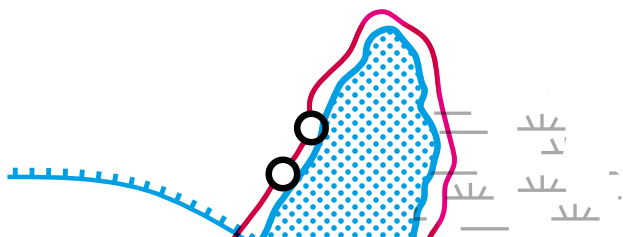
If they tell you their dreams, listen and explain that things like that don't exist. Then move on to the order of the day. Then start again from the beginning.

2

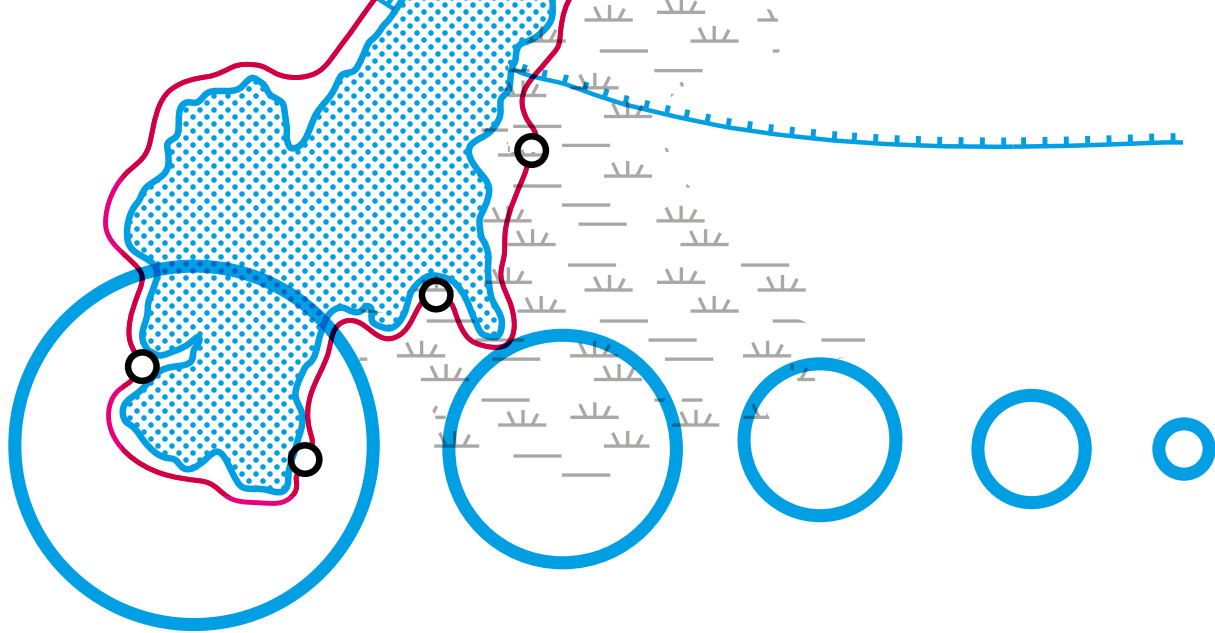
Put them in the exercise yard and make the sound of a gunshot. Practice until you can hit a slow pigeon in flight just over their heads, and have them bury the pigeon.

Or turn them over onto their backs and draw their outline on the mattress with a marker and make them stand up to look at themselves.

Ask them if the outline reminds them of anyone. Ask them who.







ON SOMETHING

# How The Light Gets In

By Niña Weijers

Translated from the Dutch by Sarah Welling

All beginnings are easy. Raindrops falling in the river. A sudden gust of wind driving the leaves around the trees in anticlockwise eddies. A tree fell to the ground, and then another. A little later the electricity cut out. Hours have passed since then. The wind has gone and so has the rain. It's evening, quiet and dark. Only it isn't actually quiet: all around there's the sound of bullfrogs and geckos, and the river churns through the valley with renewed force. And it's not dark either: clusters of stars define the sky. I'm reading a book by the light of two tealights. (They light up half a page, so to read two pages I need to move the book four times.)

Writing — the activity I will, with some hesitation, call my profession — is a curious business, though in many ways no more curious than what, say, a stockbroker does, or a publicist, a pollster, a web designer or a YouTube star. It is virtual and cloudlike, all mirage and speculation. Whether writing is 'real' or not has nothing to do with the paper it is written on, like the windows, arches, balustrades and facades on euro notes have nothing to do with the stability of the currency. In the same way that Amazon has no bookshelves, a home page has no homeland and a meme has no fixed route, literature does not have letters, words or sentences of its own. All there is, is language. More so than paint, cement and all the cameras on our devices, it is the most open of all open sources.

Does this democratic principle make any literate person a potential writer of literature? Of course it's not that simple. 'Poetry,' wrote D. H. Lawrence, 'is a matter of words. And this is just as much true as that pictures are a matter of paint, and frescoes a matter of water and colour-wash. It is such a long way from being the whole truth that it is slightly silly if uttered sententiously.'

Poetry may consist of words, images and ideas; it is also 'another thing'. In Lawrence's eyes, a writer who can't get that other thing down on paper is no more than a poetaster, a rhymester, a versifier. Poetasters make pretty, shiny baubles for the Christmas tree, which can be dusted off and hung up year after year. True writers, on the other hand, blow bubbles made of sound and colour, only to burst them again in the same breath — that's how fragile the bubbles need to be, like the breath of the poet, inside and outside the bubble, needs to be filled with a contradictory desire for both order and chaos.

Language as the soapy water the poet uses to blow his bubbles and then burst them again: I love Lawrence's metaphor, because he imagines language as something that changes shape when the breath of life is blown into it. I love it because the bubble envelops that breath and gives it shape, separating it from the air outside, and because that shape is so very fragile — it has almost ceased

to exist the moment you look at it. And also because bubbles can form connections with each other, becoming something other than themselves. And finally, because the transformation from water into a bubble is one of form and not of substance. What Lawrence's bubbles show is how one word cannot be more alive than another; at most, something can happen between the words that brings the whole to life for an instant.

That 'something' is bothering me already. It's vague, and vagueness tends to be a sign of laziness rather than mystery. And while I'm at it, the phrase 'between the words' is annoying me just as much; it suggests, ultimately, that it all revolves around something beyond words, something sacred or divine that we call inspiration or the soul, independent of the body and of actual words, and I don't believe in that. A writer is no magician or visionary, no Jesus able to conjure Lazarus from the grave. What writers do is blow bubbles. The reason they write is not to remain but to make room; not to fix things in place but to make them come unstuck.

*We do little else than speak in stale metaphors and hackneyed clichés; our language is peppered with them ('peppered': see, there I go already).*

And I mean that in the simplest, least figurative sense of the word, as loosening things that are fixed down. And if there's one thing that's fixed, it's language. We do little else than speak in stale metaphors and hackneyed clichés; our language is peppered with them ('peppered': see, there I go already). Most of the time it's not a problem; language is an instrument, after all, a means of communication. And moreover, anyone who wants to say anything the least bit spontaneously must be able to draw from a well (there I go again) of fixed meanings, a solid set of words and expressions we don't have to scratch our heads at each and every time.

Like no other, the writer needs to be aware of language's ossified state. And when she writes, she needs to at least make a valiant attempt at combating it, if nothing else. This is a question of moving and getting things moving. Arranging the words in such a way that their meaning is no longer clichéd. Moving away from clichés means

moving away from clear-cut meanings, from simplicity. This sounds more straightforward than it is; the language we have to work with is stubborn in its fixity, impressive in its impotence. 'Words fail me,' we say when things get serious. 'Indescribable' is what we call things of overwhelming beauty. We are 'struck dumb' when we want to convey our disbelief. This is the language we use to express the deficiencies of language itself.

So what's the alternative? Actually remaining silent, instead of saying that something has rendered you speechless? In many cases this would be a welcome relief, but it's not an option for a writer. A writer cannot afford to be silent about that whereof she cannot speak; she *must* speak of it. All in all, the writer finds herself in a pretty impossible position: she must bring language, which is not alive in itself, to life, without the aid of magic or divine intervention. She must compress and draw out time without the aid of a time machine. She must leave her breath in the bubble she blows, while showing, in the same breath and bubble, that 'look! — I am no longer here, this is no longer here, but despite that it does actually matter that I am blowing away like mad and that for one brief moment someone is touched by the bubbles I make'.

—

I may have given the impression that I have a particular type of novel (let's focus on novels here) in mind: the complicated, near unreadable kind, a hermetic, high-modernist experimental construct, in which language is self-referential and smitten with itself. But that's not the case at all. What I'm trying to say is, well, let me use a quote here by the Dutch writer Kees 't Hart, from an essay in which he tries to approximate what he sees as 'happy writing'. 'It's not the sentences and words that need jumbling up,' he writes, 'but the commonplaces.' So instead of mixing up words and sentences, it's all about shaking up common ideas and assumptions.

This also means that any distinction between the novel of the ivory tower and that of the streets is ultimately untenable. This was something Dutch writer Frans Kellendonk pointed out in 1986 already (at which point I was an unborn foetus floating around in a uterus — I wasn't there, is what I'm saying) during a reading in Amsterdam titled 'Idols'. Here, Kellendonk took the second commandment as his starting point: 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth.'

For him, the significance of this particular prohibition is that it points to an 'all-pervasive' question, which is how to deal with the unknown. Or, to put it another way: what is an artist, a writer, to do with that which cannot be

depicted or expressed? For believers, this unknown entity is God, but Kellendonk the writer called it reality.

A novel's relationship to reality cannot by any means be a straightforward one, because reality is not a totality that can be defined objectively. It is diffuse and chaotic, and can never be completely known. Simple realism fails to do justice to that unknowability, and actually manages to 'throw reality out the window while proclaiming its love of reality'. And then there's the type of novel that 'does not acknowledge a reality outside of language' and 'believes everything exists only to end up in a book — a book that, lacking a readership, must remain closed for all eternity'. Both kinds miss the point, writes Kellendonk, because '[b]oth deny the secret, aspiring to the inertia of a kind of art that has swallowed up reality, a sated form of art for art's sake.'

The kind of novel writing Kellendonk advocates instead is one that acknowledges the secret of reality, and takes up the challenge of that mystery. An art of the novel that both honours and disregards the second commandment at the same time. And that requires a writer who is prepared to accept that complete insight will never be granted to her. Despite this, she's still drawn to the light, like a moth to a flame. 'There is a crack in everything,' as Leonard Cohen sings, '[t]hat's how the light gets in.'

—

Towards the end of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the celebrated Australian author Elizabeth Costello is waiting at the gates of heaven, gates of a Kafkaesque nature that seem to have been created especially for her. Before she can pass through, she has to provide a written statement of belief. 'I am a writer,' she tells the gatekeeper, not yet fully aware of the tricky situation she is in. 'You have probably not heard of me here, but I write, or have written, under the name Elizabeth Costello. It is not my profession to believe, just to write. Not my business. I do imitations, as Aristotle would have said [...] I can do an imitation of belief, if you like. Will that be enough for your purposes?'

The gatekeeper provides no confirmation, just hands her a blank sheet of paper. Resolutely, she writes down her statement:

I am a writer, a trader in fictions [...] I maintain beliefs only provisionally: fixed beliefs would stand in my way. I change beliefs as I change my habitation or my clothes, according to my needs. On these grounds — professional, vocational — I request exemption from a rule of which I now hear for the first time, namely that every petitioner at the gate should hold to one or more beliefs.

In his essay 'Why' (2015) the literary critic James Wood argues that in every (good) novel there is a battle between the secular and the religious mode.

The religious mode is grounded in that-which-is-already-written. Chaos has been given a form, that form has solidified on paper, and the paper has been fixed between two covers. There's a beginning and an end, everything is retrospective, and, to quote Wood, the events that unfold '*have already happened*. Fictional form is always a kind of death.'

But the novel has an immediate impulse to compensate for its finished state, its death, its religious mode, by making the reader experience something that comes close to life itself, or rather something living that life itself cannot reveal in the same way. This is the desire for chaos, the breath that fills the bubbles with air until they grow and then burst; the possibility of changing one's belief, of doubt, illuminating something briefly and then moving on.

Belief in fiction is always metaphorical: it only resembles real belief, and it is always up to the reader to validate it or reject it: 'Fiction, being the game of not quite, is the place of not-quite-belief. Precisely what is a danger in religion is the very fabric of fiction.'

If faced with a gatekeeper of his own, James Wood would probably produce a statement similar to Elizabeth Costello's: belief in fiction is a temporary belief — a writer is not a preacher.

No more than reasonable, you might think, but Costello's statement is flatly rejected by the gatekeeper. 'What you believe,' he insists, pushing a fresh sheet of paper towards her. Until she's written it down properly, she's condemned to remain in a no man's land, a drowsy little town with a vaguely Italian feel and a shady square where young couples gaze into each other's eyes. She wonders whether the whole thing is an act put on especially for her, because she's a writer. 'Is it someone's idea of what hell will be like for a writer, or at least purgatory: a purgatory of clichés? [...] It is the same with the Kafka business. The wall, the gate, the sentry, are straight out of Kafka [...] Kafka, but only the superficialities of Kafka; Kafka reduced and flattened to a parody.'

She is summoned before a group of nine judges, who fire questions at her. Her defence is a shrewd and erudite plea against fixed beliefs, but the judges are unrelenting: Elizabeth Costello will have to stay in her no man's land, watching and waiting, as one Christmas bauble after the other is hung on the tree — a tree made of pine-scented plastic.

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Thinking of Elisabeth Costello, I realize that the island where I am is pretty reminiscent of a parody itself. Most tourists come to this island because they're tired. The world has become too complicated, too fast, too much for them; they themselves have become too complicated, too fast, too much for themselves. Their nerves have become tangled, their systems have crashed. They need to take it easy, cast off everything that isn't necessary, allowing what is essential to re-emerge. They need to live in the moment, be mindful, drink green juices, do yoga and Pilates, drench themselves in coconut oil, embrace kindred spirits, cry and laugh, so that finally they can go back home feeling recharged and get back on to the treadmill, only for their batteries to go flat again, just a little slower maybe this time.

*I feel recharged and ready to go again.* There's something obscene about this commonly used metaphor that represents our body as a battery. If we are a battery, then what is the machine? The world, or society? Is that all that's left to us — speeding up or slowing down, recharging or running down?

In all its obscenity, the battery metaphor fits in perfectly with what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls 'the Transparency Society' in an essay with that title, first published in German in 2012. He writes, 'The omnipresent demand for transparency, which has reached the point of fetishism and totalization, goes back to a paradigm shift [...] Today the society of negativity is yielding to a society that progressively dismantles negativity in favour of positivity.'

Han's essay reads like a defence of negativity, of what is secret, inaccessible and other. Because, he argues, '[o]nly machines are transparent. Eventfulness and freedom, which constitute life fundamentally, do not admit transparency.'

However well a machine can carry out calculations, it cannot think. Thought follows a path that hasn't been set out beforehand, and may even divert from its path to carefully define a new one. The process of thinking changes you, and that, in turn, changes thinking itself. Calculations are transparent; thoughts aren't. And things that aren't transparent cannot be accelerated just like that. They're all about the journey, the movement itself — that's the whole point. As Han puts it, the process is *narrative*, not *additive* in nature.

The narrative mode does justice to our lives as human beings because it is as irreducible as life itself. Han uses rituals, ceremonies and pilgrimages as examples, because these have 'their own temporality', 'their own rhythm and tact'. In that sense, novels and stories are also kinds of pilgrimages: the only way to understand them is to experience them, to undergo them yourself.

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Elisabeth Costello is a professional, both in life and on the threshold of death. Up before the judges, she clings to the kind of authorship she feels she has practised throughout her long career — one free of any real beliefs. It is the kind of authorship James Wood talks about too, and the kind most writers in the West take for granted. Without realizing it, Costello reels off clichés herself. She does it in an elegant way, but nonetheless, as a reader, you are reminded of the scene at the very beginning of the book (in the chapter titled 'Realism') in which Costello is interviewed for a radio programme. Her adult son is listening to the interview, and is able to predict exactly which answers his mother will fall back on. That is, until she suddenly says something unexpected, something new; the woman interviewing her doesn't pick up on it though, and the moment passes.

There's another unexpected turn when Costello is summoned before the judges for a second time, after she has been talking with a woman in the village. She tells a story about her childhood in rural Victoria, an area of Australia affected by periods of extreme drought and rainfall. After the torrential rains, the swollen Dulgannon River would subside, leaving behind acres of mud, and at night the croaking of thousands of little frogs could be heard. Where, little Elizabeth asked herself, did all those frogs suddenly come from?

The answer was that they were always there. During the dry season the frogs disappear deep underground. 'Their heartbeat slows, their breathing stops, they turn the colour of mud.' But then, when the first raindrops fall, they slowly awake from the dead. They dig their way up out of their tombs and start up their loud croaking chorus again.

Elisabeth Costello herself calls this story from her childhood a 'lamentably literary presentation', far more allegorical than she'd like. And yet she cannot deny that she believes in those frogs, in their existence, completely independent of, and indifferent to, her own. She knows that in these frogs she has found something — something mysterious, a kind of not-knowing which is the driving force behind her authorship:

The mud frogs of the Dulgannon are a new departure for her. Give them time: they might yet be made to ring true. For there is something about them that obscurely engages her, something about their mud tombs and the fingers of their hands, fingers that end in little balls, soft, wet, mucous.

She thinks of the frog beneath the earth, spread out as if flying, as if parachuting through the darkness. She thinks of the mud eating away at the tips of those

fingers, trying to absorb them, to dissolve the soft tissue till no one can tell any longer (certainly not the frog itself, lost as it is in its cold sleep of hibernation) what is earth, what is flesh. Yes, that she can believe in: [...] when the first quiver of returning life runs through the body and the limbs contract, the hands flex. She can believe in that, if she concentrates closely enough, word by word.

And so Elizabeth Costello's sojourn in this no man's land, this cliché-filled purgatory, turns out to be a pilgrimage, a story with its own time and duration, its own measure and rhythm. Of course none of this leads to her actually passing through the gates; there's no God to be found on the other side, or among the words of the novel for that matter. The issue here is the movement of thinking, which is a movement from simplicity to complexity, and also from chaos to complexity. This movement is irreducible, like the novel we hold in our hands. Elizabeth Costello's quest is our own. Through her, we feel our way, we are unsure, we contradict ourselves. Through her, we see how sometimes the light suddenly finds its way in, and it's not the light itself we see, but the objects it lights up. The slimy bodies of the frogs, their contracting limbs.

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On the island where I'm staying, I haven't seen many people reading a book. In the plane over here, too, high above Pakistan, India and the Bay of Bengal, mine was the only reading lamp that was lit up. A small nocturnal fish braving a sea of blue-lit screens, I thought to myself, a little sentimental owing to lack of sleep and fresh air.

I don't want to create a hierarchy between reading literature and watching films on a three-inch screen, but there's no denying that reading novels is not much in evidence as an activity these days.

The other day I was in a café when a fellow tourist in need of a chat pointed to the book I was reading. Was it a textbook, he asked, referring to the pencil in my hand. (I have the habit, or perhaps it's a neurosis, of holding a pencil in my hand while I'm reading. I scribble things in the margins: crosses, exclamation marks, sometimes a 'yes!' It doesn't amount to much, but I find it reassuring — the pencil marking my reader's tracks, leaving evidence of my own, highly individual journey through the text.)

I made a quick note in the margin: 'Man asks: is this a textbook?' It seemed a curious question, all the more so because of the title, very clearly visible on the cover in large, green capital letters against a white background: I LOVE DICK. No, I said, it wasn't a textbook. 'So for fun,' replied the man, who, I'd only just noticed, didn't have a big toe on his left foot. Mentioning that may not

be relevant here, but the fact is that I kept thinking of that missing toe in the hours that followed, and that made me think of his odd question, which so clearly defined the current state of the novel to my mind: the purpose of reading is either education or fun, take your pick — you can go for half-and-half if you like.

Not that there's anything wrong with education or entertainment, but it seems like we've become stuck in this way of thinking about reading literature.

You can see it in the way publishers position the books they publish: as summer novels or winter novels, for example. Going to South Africa? Read this. Visiting Argentina, Bhutan, Belarus? Don't worry, we have novels for those destinations too.

Bookshops are also keen on clearly signposted categories. The bookshop around the corner from where I lived for many years had an interview with its owner posted in the window for a while. In it, she argued that more novels should be given explanatory subtitles, making it clearer for bookshops and customers what kind of book they were dealing with. Could it teach you something about WWII, the Irish famine or the refugee crisis? Or about ordinary people, struggling with their anonymous existence in the big city? 'It's only when the book's finished that the work really starts,' the bookseller concluded. A truism, to her at least (at some point, the pale-faced writer who kept having to pass this window on her way to the shops was sorely tempted to cover that quote with duct tape).

Newspapers and magazines, for their part, eagerly come up with all manner of features, such as 'The Five Best Novels to Help You Understand...' (fill in a subject of choice: terrorism or Germany or women).

It seems reviewers are also keen on books with a clear message, plot, genre and believable characters. Here's a small selection from the past few weeks, primarily from the paper I subscribe to:

Thankfully, in her first novel the author has managed to keep her philosophical impulses in check.

Their lack of centre weakens the stories' narrative force.

In other words, the novelist has not managed to restrain the essayist sufficiently.

It may just be me, but even upon rereading, the [book's] rambling narrative style and all the half-finished thoughts and lines of reasoning still drove me completely mad.



Sometimes I get the idea that, in terms of marketing, ethics and literary criticism, we're still stuck in the nineteenth century. Even an exceptional critic like James Wood prefers to fall back on writers like Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Thomas Mann when providing examples. Not that there's anything against these great dead white men and their important books, but if this remains the only frame of reference on which we base all our ideas of what literature should be, then we run the risk of turning it into a cliché, a hotel of faded glory and dead language, which people only visit now and then out of nostalgia.

And when you're there, in that hotel room, with its musty sheets and mummified moths; when you find a set of urinary catheters the previous guest has left behind in the bathroom; as you walk through the dining room where people used to sit down to table, dressed to the nines, but which is now resoundingly empty; then you, the last remaining reader, the last remaining author, do feel the urge to raise your finger and say, 'Yes, but, don't you know that literature makes you a better person, a more humane person?'

Don't be tempted by such arguments! Just skip all those semi-scientific studies in the papers. They reduce novels to dispensers of empathy, and readers to people who need to be educated. And obviously people who never read a book will not be susceptible to this kind of rhetoric: there are far more efficient ways to be a good person, ways that are far more helpful to others — why not visit an elderly relative who is not as mobile any more?

If you really want to encourage people to read literature, you're better off adding a certain mystique. Because the secret the writer is faced with, the secret of language and of reality, is shared by the reader. Just as the writer keeps writing against the stream of unknowing, the reader keeps reading against the stream, and at best they meet each other somewhere in the text. Such a meeting can produce all kinds of things: knowledge, insight, entertainment, but, primarily, an experience. And as we all know, experience is something that is very difficult to transfer in any other form than experience itself. It's connected to the body, the nerves, the underbelly — anyone who has ever been in love knows this (as does anyone who has ever tried to get someone in love to snap out of it, for that matter).

So, rather than education or enjoyment (distraction, escapism) I would argue for a third way when it comes to promoting the novel: that of the irreducible experience. This is what Elizabeth Costello sets against belief; it is what loosens things and opens them up; it is the narrative process Byung-Chul Han sets against the additive process of acceleration and calculation.

In essence, the narrative process that forms the novel has little to do with plot, just like life itself has little to do with plot. I couldn't really say what the plot of *Elizabeth Costello* is, for example. Sure, all kinds of things happen: people travel across a number of continents, there are confrontations, there's sex in a hotel room, a nervous breakdown in an Amsterdam toilet, and then there are the goings-on at the gate to heaven. But there's no conventional narrative arc, no necessary sequence of events, no skeleton and no closet. In this novel, the most important events are reflections or considerations.

*If you really want to encourage people to read literature, you're better off adding a certain mystique. Because the secret the writer is faced with, the secret of language and of reality, is shared by the reader.*

One such event takes place during the radio programme I referred to earlier. The woman interviewing Costello is talking about women who have, in the course of history, been given a voice by male authors, ostensibly for the purposes of liberating them but actually to confirm the male world view (I picture Coetzee giving himself a pat on the back while writing this passage). Costello herself is known for a career-defining novel in which she reimagined Molly Bloom, away from the confines of the house that Joyce built around her. The interviewer wonders whether the author has anything to say about 'the project of reclaiming women's lives in general'.

Costello knowingly remarks that the Heathcliffs and Rochesters could also do with being freed from the romantic stereotypes that imprison them, before adding something that, to her son's surprise, isn't part of the usual script at all. 'But, seriously,' she says, 'we can't go on parasitizing the classics for ever. I am not excluding myself from the charge. We've got to start doing some inventing of our own.'

The call for something new is as old as the art of the novel itself. In the middle of the sixteenth century the Latin word *novella*, which means 'new stories' or 'new things', found its way into Italian and, from there, the rest



of Europe, including Britain and the English language, sticking around there to this day in the word ‘novel’. The *novella* had no fixed meaning or rules, it could be all kinds of things, allowing the novel to reinvent itself again and again.

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We live in interesting and frightening times, like everyone who came before us and everyone who will come after us, no doubt. In any case, these are times in which stories with varying degrees of fictionality are told to us in a myriad of ways, and times in which not a year goes by without someone taking it upon themselves to proclaim the definitive death of the novel.

Those who still want to write novels need, perhaps more than ever, to ask themselves why the story they want to tell should take the form of a novel and not a film, a series, a play, a podcast, a website or a game. ‘Because writing is my calling’ is a pathetic answer. Feeling an inner urge is a blessing, certainly, but it’s a starting point and not a final conclusion.

The answer I’d like to propose here — and I think we’re all surprised there is an answer in the end — is that writers try to get to know something and say something that won’t come to light in any other way. A successful novel *is* something in itself, and its form and content, ethics and aesthetics cannot be separated from each other without hopelessly reducing the whole thing. A successful novel always offers ambiguity, resistance and the possibility of multiple positions so that the reader isn’t forced into just one.

As long as writers engage with the art of novel writing itself, they will naturally be preoccupied with undermining it in some way, however small, so that new sounds, new forms, new bubbles emerge.

And this is why Elizabeth Costello’s call for something new is not naive but an urgent necessity. Like Renata Adler said, in reference to her kaleidoscopic novels *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark*: ‘You couldn’t be, say, Dickens now, or George Eliot, or Henry James. Or maybe you could write like them, with luck, but it would not be true to our time, false somehow.’ Especially in a late-capitalistic age of privatization and so-called realpolitik, in which there seems to be a growing disdain for anything that smacks of elitism, complicated language and nuanced thought, a complex novel can provide insight and counterweight. Most novels are not commissioned, nor are astronomical production costs or subsidies involved, the maker is rarely obliged to produce something that is audience-friendly, accessible or topical. This makes the novel an almost dizzyingly free space for unrestricted

experimentation and exploration — in short or long sentences, through an overload of plot lines, or a lack of them, through small lives and big ones, characters who seem real or cardboard cut-outs — or, why not, without any characters at all. Let the novel be a hybrid, uneven, fickle, contrary thing, torn between two or two hundred ideas. Instead of masters of a genre, let writers be masters of excess.

Give me a living novel like Chris Kraus’s *I Love Dick*, an epistolary novel, autobiography, performance piece, work of critical theory and feminist pamphlet all rolled into one. Give me a book like Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, an indictment of racism formulated through poetry, essays and visual art. And give me everything by Anne Enright, who ostensibly writes conventional family novels, all the while engaged in a quiet revolution of language and style and jumbled-up meanings. I want to read books like Geoff Dyer’s *Out of Sheer Rage*, Valeria Luiselli’s *Faces in the Crowd* and Ben Lerner’s *10:04*, novels that have been swallowed up by the process of writing itself. I want to read Marie Darrieusecq and Marie NDiaye for their wildly twisting sentences and intangible structures. Give me Dana Spiotta and her fascination with ‘afterlives, codas, postscripts, discursive asides, and especially misdirection’. Renata Adler, who breaks off anecdote after anecdote before they’ve acquired direction or meaning. Give me, finally, Coetzee, who wrote a miracle of a book in *Elizabeth Costello*, fleeting as a bubble, constantly escaping its own form.

All beginnings are easy, sure, but in good books everything began a long time ago.

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On the island where I’m staying, people sometimes ask me what I am. ‘Mother?’ the people from the island ask me. ‘Wife?’ People from the West ask what I do for a living.

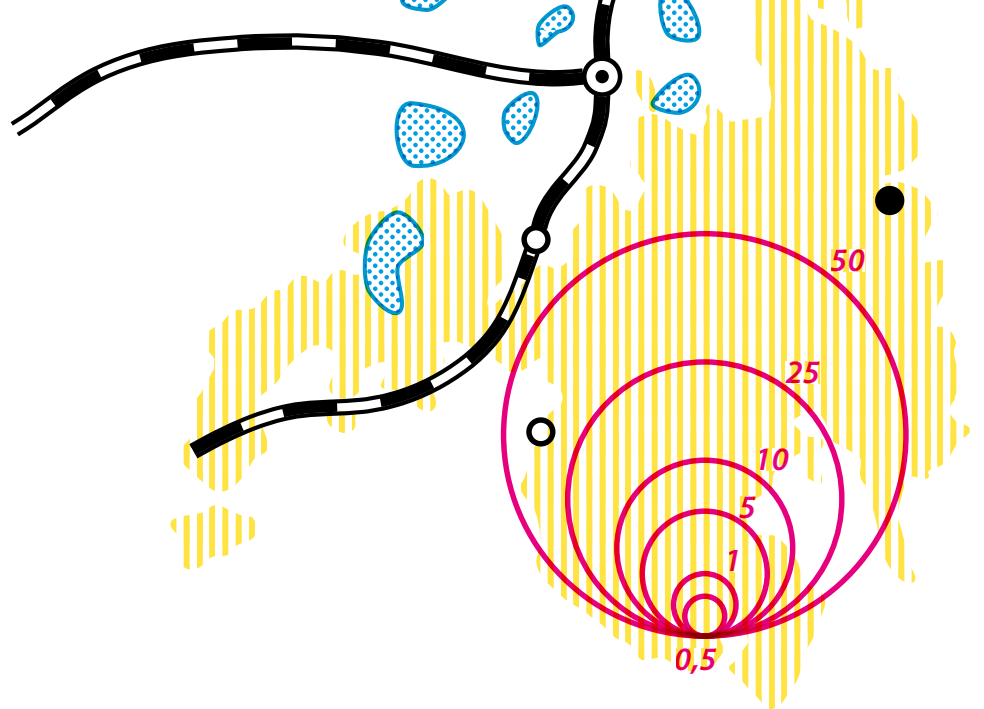
Novelist, I answer. They look at me, uncomprehending.

I try to make new things, I say.

But what *kind* of things?

Vulnerable things, I say in the end. Secret things. Soap bubbles. ♦





**LYNN BERGER**, 'Passages of Time' original title:  
'Vluchtig als de schaduw', first published in *De Groene Amsterdammer* (2011), translation: Erica Moore

**HANNA BERVOETS**, 'Day 1851', original title:  
'Dag 1851', first published in *Das Magazin* (2015),  
translation: Jonathan Reeder

**THIJS DE BOER**, 'Walking Urge', original title:  
'Loopdrang', taken from: *Vogels die vlees eten* (Uitgeverij  
*Nieuw Amsterdam*, 2010), translation: Liz Waters

**THOMAS HEERMA VAN VOSS**, 'Invisible Books',  
original title: 'Onzichtbare boeken', first published by  
Babel & Voss (2014), translation: Alice Tetley-Paul

**PHILIP HUFF**, 'She', original title: 'Zij', taken from:  
*Goed om hier te zijn* (De Bezige Bij, 2013), translation:  
Philip Huff

**ESTER NAOMI PERQUIN**, poems taken from the  
forthcoming *The Hunger in Plain View* (White Pine Press,  
2017). Translation: David Colmer

**NINA POLAK**, 'Do Not Pet', original title: 'Verboden  
te aaien', 2016, translation: Vivien D. Glass

**MUSTAFA STITOU**, poems taken from *Tempel*  
(De Bezige Bij, 2013), these poems will be included in the  
English collection currently in preparation for Phoneme  
Media (due 2018). Translation: David Colmer

**NIÑA WEIJERS**, 'How The Light Gets In', original  
title: 'Hoe het licht binnenvalt', first published by VU  
University Press (2016), translation: Sarah Welling

**MAARTJE WORTEL**, 'A Small Planet', original title:  
'Kleine Planeet', taken from: *Er moet iets gebeuren*  
(*Das Mag*, 2015), translation: Michele Hutchison