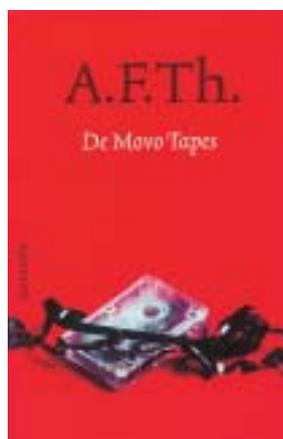


A.F.Th.

The Movo Tapes



AFTER SEVEN YEARS of silence A.F.Th. van der Heijden has published *De Movo Tapes*, the 'zeroth' volume of the *Homo duplex* – 'split human' – series that, according to a list of titles in the front of the book, will extend over nine volumes.

Although a series of books in which everything connects up organically is typical of Van der Heijden, his new saga is fundamentally dif-

ferent. *Homo duplex* does not look back at a recent past but takes place in an imagined near future. In addition, he endows his hero with distinctly mythical traits. In *Homo duplex* A.F.Th. will recreate the myth of Oedipus in modern times, not by following Sophocles' tragedy step by step, but by using the elements of the myth to create a sparkling new story.

The name of A.F.Th.'s modern Oedipus is Tibbolt Satink, born after his mother has a bizarre traffic accident on a car-free Sunday. Tibbolt, soon sure of his own special nature, seeks a transformation. He is convinced that he can saddle someone else with his death, but to do this he must himself first become someone else.

The story of Tibbolt/Movo is told in two intertwining narratives. One narrative has a character who can be identified as Apollo. This character, who will later adorn himself with the code name QX-Q-8, recounts how he was able to track down a box of cassette tapes in the basement archives of an Amsterdam publishing house after Movo's death. The tapes have deteriorated because of moisture and dirt, and QX-Q-8 has them restored in a laboratory; so that he can listen to Movo's spoken notes for the book about his amazing transformation: *A career as someone else*.

In the other story Tibbolt Satink himself speaks in raw, pointed monologues. He records these monologues on a dictaphone, sitting behind the steering wheel of his car. Agitated by the high speed, he philosophizes freely about time, the state of the planet, and his own life. Tibbolt carries on a striking and constant inner dialogue on the tapes with Movo, his 'better self.'

The tirades remind us of the famous stream of consciousness in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Satink – aware of this link – speaks of a 'scream of consciousness.' A.F.Th. lets this scream reverberate with incredible imagination and stylistic power in an explosion of language that dizzies you and leaves you waiting tensely for the following volumes.



photo Michiel van Nieuwkerk

A.F.Th. van der Heijden (b. 1951) published his first two books under the pseudonym Patrizio Canaponi. He then began publishing under his own name. After *The Toothless Time* (*De tandeloze tijd*), a brilliant seven-volume saga about Amsterdam in the seventies and eighties, Van der Heijden has started another fascinating megalomaniac project.

There is not one author in the Dutch language who equals A.F.Th. in magically transforming high-flown philosophical theories into such sparkling prose, quivering with life.

DE MORGEN

Actually it's shamelessly over the top, that's plain as the nose on your face. But at the same time it is so well written, and with so much talent, that all possible objections are pushed away by all the qualities that are present in the text. A balancing act of the kind that one seldom encounters.

NRC HANDELSBLAD



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SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

Die zahnloze Zeit (*De tandeloze tijd*).
Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003.
Die Schlacht um die Blaubrücke (*De slag om de Blauwbrug*). Frankfurt am Main:
Suhrkamp, 2001. Also in Russian (Inapress, 1999), in Bulgarian (Literarisches Forum, in prep.).

Ein Tag, ein Leben (*Het leven uit een dag*).
Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992.
Also in Spanish (Ediciones Península, 1995), in Finnish (Werner Söderström Osakeyhtiö, 1990), in Swedish (Forum, 1991), in Bulgarian (PIC, 1997), and in Norwegian (Gyldendal, in prep.).

Der Widerborst (*Weerborstels*). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993.

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An interview with A.F.Th. van der Heijden

Get God to Come Out

by Elsbeth ETTY

(NRC Handelsblad, 21 February 2003)

translated by Roz Vatter-Buck

Adri van der Heijden, the author A.F.Th., is physically unwell after the publication of *The Movo Tapes*, part nought of his intended nine-part cycle, *Homo Duplex*. His stomach is upset. "I've been in such a routine with my work for so long now, without much variety in my life, and now that there is, my body is playing up".

This is obviously his punishment for interrupting the isolation in which the writer finds himself when struggling with the complicated material of his series of novels. The streets around Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, the district where Van der Heijden lives, are given names in the book such as Exile Street and Isolation Way, situated in the Penal Quarter. "There's actually a street here named after the composer, Ban. I initially made Banstraat into Exile Street, just for a joke. The main character Movo's grandfather has a bookshop there, where literary evenings are held where writers are perpetually trying to size each other up. Movo thinks: writers should voluntarily go into exile, like the ancient Greeks did. If someone was too good, he ruined the competition and was sent to another country. He thinks writers should want to be just as good as the banished tragedy writer".

The isolation he feels rankles Van der Heijden.

"The past ten, fifteen years, I've felt rejected mostly. But, what the hell, maybe without this feeling of exclusion I would never have come up with the idea: you have to write like the tragedy writer who was banished because he was spoiling the competition. If your destiny is loneliness, then let it be the dignified loneliness of self-exile".

Van der Heijden does not simply want to be slightly above average. He strives to master projects that exceed his powers. "It all comes from a book I read when I was around twenty about Nietzsche, a primary example of someone who tried to create beyond his capabilities. Something more than humanly possible. That's the exciting thing about literature, in my view: trying to reach above yourself. In that respect, the Dutch mentality is narrow-minded. In America they at least still aim for the Great American Novel and are megalomaniac enough to actually realise that goal. Dutch literature could be among the world literature if that ambition existing here".

Teddy Bears

“Books I ought to read – I mean ones I myself feel I ought to – I sleep with them, in a manner of speaking. They lie around me like worn-out teddy bears. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is one of them”.

No, he didn’t get the idea from *Ulysses* to work a theme from classical antiquity into a novel, as he is now doing in *Homo Duplex* with the Oedipus myth.

“Actually, I only saw the comparison in retrospect. I was adapting Sophocles’ Oedipus tragedy and the Oedipus myth, when it suddenly struck me: Well, I’ll be damned, it’s just as if I was deliberately doing the same as Joyce did with Homer’s *Odysseus*. But when I started on it, I wasn’t thinking about Joyce at all”.

Initially, he was not planning to write a novel, but a philosophical work on the question: How do I write the impossible book? He has handed that task over in his novel cycle, *Homo Duplex*, to Tibbolt Satink, nicknamed Movo, short for ‘moeilijke voeten’ (difficult feet). Satink, alias Movo, is the modern-day Oedipus, unable to escape the fate allotted him by the gods of murdering his father, marrying his mother and subsequently putting out his own eyes.

“Movo discovers that you can write the impossible book by encircling it, moving around it, describing it. He finds out that a mixed form of aphorism and prose poetry will generate the ideal building blocks for the impossible book. All attempts to write it come in later parts of the cycle. If you add up those attempts, that gives you a picture of the impossible book, which will be called *God’s Poems*.

Unlike Joyce, Van der Heijden’s prose is not experimental. But the way he composes his cycle is. “I needs several lines. The experiment is in what to allow to come into it, but I’m not someone who starts experimenting willy-nilly in the sense of: what I’ve got so far is too readable; let’s start sniping it up, letting it fall on the ground and then putting it back on paper like a handful of scrabble letters, so only the veteran puzzler can work it out”. What will puzzle the reader of *The Movo Tapes* is the dates. Unlike the time unity in *Ulysses* (the story takes place on 16 June 1904, the day Joyce met the love of his life, Nora), the story in *The Movo Tapes* flicks backwards and forwards in time. 10 February 1973, the day Movo’s parent first meet and he is conceived, plays a prominent role. Other recurring dates are Movo’s supposed birthday, 4 November 1973 (the first Sunday there was a ban on driving private vehicles) and 31 August 1997 (the day Princess Diana died). Van der Heijden: “The *Movo Tapes* are dictated by Tibbolt Satink on 31 August 1997. The day in February 1973 runs parallel. A couple of months later, it turns out that sixteen-year-old Zora, Movo’s biological mother, became pregnant during the shooting of a porno film”.

Sect leader

The anonymous narrator in *The Movo Tapes* is no other than the god of light, Apollo. He is looking back from the year 2024 at the historic events that have taken place since 21 July 1969, the first man on the moon, on the stage of Earth's theatre. He sees links no-one else could, such as between the moon landing and the murders committed a few weeks later on the instructions of the American sect leader, Charles Manson. Van der Heijden is, as can be seen from his earlier work, a chronicler of his time. Will he be fitting other historical events, such as the attacks on 11 September 2001, the murder of Pim Fortuyn and any other forthcoming disasters into the upcoming parts of *Homo Duplex*? No one is more curious about the answer to this question than the author himself.

“The structure of the cycle lends itself to incorporating anything you like. But I'm most interested in the last few years of the twentieth century and the first few years of the 21st. If you follow Sophocles' tragedies, you see that you can attribute all kinds of contemporary experiences to King Oedipus. Then you get Oedipus in Colons, which is far woollier. It's about life and death; it's a static tragedy, primarily about internal processes. My version of Oedipus in Kolonos will be set in the first quarter of the 21st century. I don't need to involve reality there. It will be mostly about the inner life of the virtually blind Movo, who is writing his humanly impossible book in his head. Only real events in the first few years of the new century will be mentioned. Movo, as it will turn out in part two of *Homo Duplex*, is the one who beats his father to death on a hooligan battlefield. He is also suspected of wanting to stage a coup: there has to be a good reason why he is always talking about the Global Strike. He ends up in the High Security Prison in Vught. That presents all kinds of other opportunities to involve topical events, as that prison is receiving an awful lot of negative criticism at the moment”.

“I don't rule out the possibility that the murder of Fortuyn will be included; I could link it to the fantasy of a Global Strike. But somewhere along the line, the story slips into an internal process inside Movo. Towards the end of his life – he dies in 2023, just before this fiftieth birthday – he is supported by his daughter, while, in the background, his sons vie for the hooligans' throne of Rotterdam. I get him to go to London for a congress for hooligan gang leaders. Maybe I will make a link with terrorism. I've put together a file on 11 September.”

Marxist

In *The Movo Tapes*, Tibbolt Satink says, “How should I measure the distance between my breakfast, at which I savour the morning paper, and the events described in that paper, which profess to be part of my reality?” It seems as if Van der Heijden's main character feels the almost Marxist need to be part of

history. He does everything – whether it is the death of Princess Diana, which he compares with his (supposed) mother’s car crash, or the oil crisis and the car-free Sunday on which he is supposed to be able to blame his difficult feet – to draw historic facts towards himself.

“Movo has, indeed, a strong need to bridge his distance from the world of events. At the same time, in his mind, he is occupied with something as impossible as preparing a Global Strike against the human condition. He, himself, goes so far as to say: If we can only strike hard enough, if we can get as many people as possible to participate, as long as we can agree to stop copulating and reproducing, then we will put the higher authority that might be God under such pressure that he will actually come out. And if he doesn’t appear, then we’ve proved he doesn’t exist. Like so many people, Movo would love to play a part on the world’s stage, but it is all so far from hearth and home. His longing for real involvement also has to do with the process of his ‘career as someone else’. He wants to transform the gentle Tibbolt Satink into the rock-hard Movo. And, in his eyes, Movo needs the world of the great events”.

The Movo Tapes carries the subtitle, ‘A Career as Someone Else’ and the main character is someone who changes his own name into the abbreviation, Movo. Does Van der Heijden’s name change – his new cycle is being published only under his initials, A.F.Th. – perhaps have something to do with his own wish to become someone else? The author, who incidentally allows you to address him without any fuss, simply as Adri, has had enough of people going on about those initials. “It’s nothing to do with arrogance,” he says. “A writer has to discover himself again with every new book. You have to force yourself in the direction of the book you want to write one way or another. Of course my name change has something to do with the character of Satink, who calls himself Movo. *Homo Duplex*, the title says it all, is about a person who splits himself up, who wants to take on another identity, who is running away from himself, only to end up in the arms of his own identity. Oedipus is also someone who runs away from himself and only then really finds himself. As the book is about identity change and identity fraud, I dared to just put my initials to it. That will only last as long as the cycle; it has nothing to do with megalomania”.

In *Homo Duplex*, Apollo has sold his name to NASA, but it seems he does not enjoy having to do without a name. “Neither do I, any more, after everything that’s been said about it,” grumbles A.F.Th.

In the meantime, the thematic arrogance of the book lies not in the amputated author’s name, but in the writer’s implicit equation of himself with Apollo, who looks down rather pityingly on mankind’s brooding over the meaning of life. According to Van der Heijden, however, there is another possible interpretation,

namely that Tibbolt Satink, who thinks he is powerful enough to change into Movo and thus escape his own death, speaks with the voice of Apollo. “You could conclude that Tibbolt Satink is Movo is Apollo. Then you end up with the idea that Tibbolt Satink would actually like to be attributed with writing the entire history of the world. I don’t know whether that is still megalomania; it goes far further. I’m not citing this as the only explanation, but is it possible that, in Apollo’s voice, we hear Movo’s voice”.

Blot

Although there is no connection between Homo Duplex and Van der Heijden’s previous cycle, *The Toothless Time* (De tandeloze tijd), there are little references. In *The Toothless Time*, Albert Egberts develops the philosophy of ‘live life laterally’, Movo is constantly struggling with attempts to grasp ‘here and now’ and says, at one point, ‘live life laterally is an exercise in dying’. The difference between the two ideas, according to Van der Heijden, is that what ‘live life laterally’ boils down is making an isolated moment in time as broad as possible. “It has to be as much as possible all rolled together. Tibbolt Satink wants nothing to do with that view. He is occupied with time in another way. According to him, past and future do not exist. He realises that ‘now’ is the only portal to transformation into another person. Movo is waiting for the moment to escape”.

‘Live life laterally’ was the one-liner that endures from *The Toothless Time*. In *The Movo Tapes*, the recurring theme – also the last sentence in the book – is that man is nothing but an inkblot in the book of history, not even worth a footnote. “It is the final conclusion of the narrator, Apollo, who, by the end of the book is despondent about everything he has done to try and ensnare people. He thinks, ‘Why am I doing it? What is man, anyway?’ But the reduction of mankind to a blot in the history book is also Movo’s main reason for organising the Global Strike”.

Riddles abound in *The Movo Tapes*. There is a sphinx in the book, a quizmaster in a Rotterdam bar. Movo’s parents are not who he thinks they are. His real parents abandoned him but pretend he is in their midst; a subtle reference to Edward Albee’s *Who’s afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

“In another part, the imaginary son plays a major role. He gets into a fight with Movo. How? The truth will out if I tell you the real story of Oedipus, on whom fate has been playing tricks,” announces Van der Heijden. At least as mysterious is the girl, Sabberita, from Mierlo, with whom Movo spent the summer in 1991, which had a drastic effect on his life. What exactly happened, remains shrouded in mist and even if you re-read Van der Heijden’s novella, *Sabberita* (1998), from which whole chunks have been incorporated word for word in *The Movo Tapes*,

it provides no clues. “The story of Sabberita is dealt with more extensively in part two. She’s the least fictional character in the book and is the closest to reality: the unattainable girl from my youth”.

Other riddles are hidden in car makes that refer to the patristic scriptures and number plates in which you find biblical verses, but those are jokes and not really of any importance. “As the composer of the novel, I let the riddles of the Sphinx echo in all kinds of corners of the story, but the reader doesn’t need to solve them to get any further. The reader simply has a superb soap in his hands, which is set at the end of the twentieth century. It’s nice if you know something about the Oedipus story, because then it starts ringing all kinds of other bells”.

Van der Heijden has no fear that readers will not understand *The Movo Tapes*, with all its story lines and references to things to come. “That’s exactly why I called this book part nought of a cycle. The reader has to accept that there are elements in it that only serve as references to the future. At the same time, I am composing the parts so they can be read individually – that counts far more – with exception of *Laywer to the Punks* (Advocaat van de hanen, 1990) – for *Homo Duplex* than for *The Toothless Time*. Part three will be a separate love story and part four an independent thriller”.

About the future of his writing career, Van der Heijden, who has cheered up noticeably during the interview, says, “The secret of my life is perhaps that I attach myself to great things, while striving for freedom. For me, freedom means: allowing myself the scope for this kind of big project, to which I can then chain myself. It makes me feel good”.

Sample translation from

The Movo Tapes by A.F.Th.
(Amsterdam: Querido, 2003)

Translated by David Colmer

(pp. 100-106)

QX-Q-8

The Movo Tapes

Now that all parties directly involved are dead (only Movo's daughter Jolente is still alive), I can finally unfold the story in its entirety. For my own entertainment and that of my fellows, all of whom still possess their own name.

Movo died six months ago, just before his fiftieth birthday. Since then, Jolente has been working with two employees of the Constantijn Huygens Institute on a compilation of excerpts from her father's impossible magnum opus *God's Poems*. The book has been announced for next autumn and will be published by De Spiegel, an imprint of the Hoek Keizersgracht-Spiegelstraat publishing company. It's been in the papers and even made the TV news. I was moved to see that Hoek had survived all the mergers and reorganisations, as well as rising illiteracy, despite years of having to cope without the free advice of Movo's grandfather, Olle Tornij. Their offices hadn't even moved, they were still in the old building on the corner of Keizersgracht and Spiegelstraat. It seemed that they now came under the umbrella of an even larger group: Uitgeverijen Nederland & Vlaanderen BV, soon to be subsumed within European Publishers Ltd. The "highly distinctive character" of De Spiegel's list would not be

compromised, I read. Excellent, that means that Movo's *God's Poems* will reach the public, who for the first time will be able to read a book that cannot humanly be written, it testifies to that and bears the traces of that impossibility. Wonders will never cease.

Much earlier, at twenty-three, Movo had been working on a similarly impossible book. He planned to base it on a large number of tapes that he recorded in the summer of 1997, mostly while driving. At regular intervals, he would send a few to Hoek for transcription. The book never happened, of course, and in any case doesn't interest me, but those hundred or so tapes do. The information they undoubtedly contain could be vital to completing my story. My colleagues are shamelessly inquisitive about anything to do with human tragedy, but sniff with disdain at every missing detail or link. I had to gain possession of what I privately referred to as the Movo Tapes, no matter what the cost.

Over the centuries, I have presented myself to humanity in a variety of guises and taken on many roles, but professor of literary theory was not yet among them. I phoned Hoek and asked for the managing director of De Spiegel. They put me through to an editor.

"Gitty Pleyte d'Ailly, De Spiegel publishing." The cheerful voice of an elderly lady.

"Good morning. I'm calling from Amsterdam University on behalf of a seminar dedicated to the intellectual legacy of your good friend Movo. We are anxiously awaiting the publication of *God's Poems*..."

"And you'd like to see the proofs in the meantime? They're not ready yet."

"No, that's not what I'm calling about. I – we have heard that Movo had a book in preparation at Hoek when he was younger too..."

"That's right, Noon to Neon. But it went no further than those tapes. You spoke to me about them only recently."

"No, at least..."

"You are Mr Knippels, the journalist, aren't you?"

“No, I’m the professor. Head of the seminar for the intellectual legacy of... as I’ve just explained. Now, we were wondering whether you still had those tapes in your archives.”

“It’s like this, Professor – er. Last week a man rang, introducing himself as Matt Knippels, investigative journalist. I’ve seen his articles. He reminded me that he had once published two books with Hoek, late last century. He referred to that earlier connection and requested the same as you, asked to listen to Tibbolt Satink’s tapes.”

“Did he tell you why as well?”

“He wanted to write an article about them, to be published at the same time as God’s Poems. That’s not the kind of thing a publisher turns down.”

“So the material’s been handed over?”

“Not yet. I promised that I delve plunge into the archives as soon as I had the time. I wasn’t even sure the stuff was still here. Years ago Satink’s daughter – Movo’s, I mean – requested it as well.”

“And now – if I might be so bold?”

“We found it yesterday. I still have to phone Knippels.”

“Please, Ms Pleyte d’Ailly, as a member of the academic community, I beg you, don’t hand the material over to him. I am moderately familiar with Mr Knippels’s work. It’s sensationalist through and through. His piece will provide you with some publicity in the human-interest area, and that’s it. What I have to offer instead is something far more solid. I should like to consider with my students, how far Noon to Neon can be reconstructed from the spoken text. Later I should like to extend the research project to include God’s Poems. Our goal is a critical study in book form.”

“That would be wonderful, Professor.”

“Your co-operation is, however, essential, Ms Pleyte d’Ailly.”

“Of course, I could get it copied.”

“Exclusivity regarding any findings would be of the utmost importance.”

“I can guarantee that, but in return I would appreciate – without immediately insisting upon a binding agreement...”

“You will be the first to see the book. It’s up to you whether or not to publish.”

“Very well then. We’ll let Mr Knippels believe that the material’s disappeared. As long as you, Professor, in turn...”

“I shall swear my students to complete silence. If anyone lets anything slip, he’ll be kicked out of the seminar, and not just that, but out of the university as well. And we meet on the fourth floor, so...”

“I’m relying on you.”

“Just tell me when to drop in.”

“Four o’clock this afternoon – would that be convenient?”

“I’ll be there. But first I need to apply for your declaration of academic canonization. The registrar has the forms.”

That damned Knippels. He’d been getting in my way for more than fifty years and had almost foiled my plans again. “Investigative journalist”. And an ancient one at that. He must be pushing eighty by now. One of those characters whose “fingers never stop itching.” He’d lost out this time.

Gitty Pleyte d’Ailly had started at Hoek as a young woman in her early twenties. She was about sixty now, but there was still enough youth and zip in her veins for at least another ten autumn catalogues. Alerted by the receptionist, she came up to me at the front desk. The surprised look on her face told me that I did not look like a professor of literature. White hair, dark-blue eyes, red nail polish – she held out a hand.

“May I ask with whom I have the honour? I’m afraid I wasn’t alert enough on the phone.”

Bowing slightly, I gave her the benefit of my most human smile. “The problem is... I can’t introduce myself to you properly. I’ve sold my name.”

At first she wasn’t sure how to respond. I nodded encouragingly.

“Oh yes, of course,” she said, her face relaxing. “I understand the quotation.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll take you down to the archives. Not that the stuff is still there, it’s in my office. But I’d love you to see for yourself the conditions of the cellar where it’s been kept for almost thirty years. That will prepare you a little.”

“Please.”

A spiral staircase led us down to a complex of rooms connected by arched doorways. The vaults were too low to stand upright. Wooden partitions rested on the packed earthen floor, rotted away in places to leave a kind of masticated liquorice root. There was an air of mould and decay. Against the rough brick walls stood metal racks filled with warped folders and spongy, collapsing boxes. Grimy neon lights gave off a sickly light.

“This is where our supply clerk found the tapes.”

She tilted a cardboard box, which thirty years earlier had contained five reams of photocopying paper, so I could look into it. Mouse-droppings rustled across the bottom, enough to fill a box of chocolate sprinkles.

“You can see and feel how damp it is down here. One of our staff members got to work with some old equipment this morning after you rang. The tapes won’t turn. He opened one of the cases. The tape itself has swollen from the moisture and stuck together. We can’t get it to budge at all.”

“I know a laboratory, Madam, which is specialised in audio and visual tape. They work magic there. They’ll get anything going.”

“I still fear the worst. Someone else pointed out that a few years ago they were working with pneumatic drills on just the other side of this wall, removing old foundations. Apparently such vibration is guaranteed to destroy any sound left on fragile tape like this.”

“We’ll see.” Poor Movo. His voice had not survived him.

“I’ll take you up to my room.” Before turning off the light at the top of the stairs, the editor turned back one last time to look at her company’s underbelly. “I’m going to push through a major renovation down here.”

On her desk lay a mountain of microcassettes, . Each sealed in its own plastic bag. Dumbstruck Movo. Labels giving numbers and recording dates were stuck on the black cases: No. 17a/b 9.VII.97 No; 151a 1.IX.97; No 151b 2.IX.97.

“How many are there, for God’s sake?”

“A hundred and seventy-nine. Number 96 is missing. Some tapes are thirty minutes each side, others sixty. According to my colleague, those are the most vulnerable, because the tape’s so thin.”

“I hope to God they can be restored. The loss will be too much for me otherwise. My students will have to bury me. Assuming the bad news doesn’t do for them as well.”

“If we have to accept the loss of his voice, we still have this...”

Gitty Pleyte d’Ailly lifted an almost eight-inch-thick pile of paper from the windowsill and dropped it on the desk in front of me. Written on the top page in ballpoint: Transcription for “Noon to Neon” of Tapes 1 to 179, dictated by T.Satink (1973-2023) excl. No. 96.

“Along with the tapes, we found a complete print-out of the transcripts. All stuck together from the damp and covered in cobwebs. It looked like an old piece of fishnet stocking I can tell you, Professor. The mice had nibbled at the paper but only at the outside edges, they stayed neatly inside the margins. But what to do with that wad of wet pulp?”

“Weren’t there any disks?”

“We looked. Hopeless. We’re like a cemetery here, professor. There’s a constant turnover. I put a girl to work with a hair-dryer and we peeled the pile, page by page. The letters were faded, but legible. Then we copied each page at an extra dark setting. And here you have it, Professor: the complete Movo.”

“Ms Pleyte d’Ailly, do you ever cease to amaze?”

I began leafing through the pile, reading passages here and there.

“...simultaneously having a lot of Living Time at our disposal and yet hardly any, that is the mystery. Sometimes I think: sixty or seventy pocket diaries and it’s all over. Fifty summer holidays and it’s finished...

Are things really so pathetically simple? Within one of those years that fits into an office diary or tear-off calendar, lie hidden extensive catacombs: parallel developments – weeks that flash by, sluggish months, days that are built up like a whole semester. A year is not linear, it’s a labyrinth, and that’s something we should exploit shamelessly. What applies to twelve months is also valid for an entire human life. A maze garden, well maintained, can achieve a glimmer of eternity.”

(pp. 117-124)

QX-Q-8

Noon to Neon

Each transcription of a tape ended with the name of one of two editors, either Lucrees van Zanten Jut or Gitty Pleyte d'Ailly.

“You were actively involved at the time, I see.”

“You can say that again. In the end I got so involved it almost killed me.”

“I can imagine that. Living with someone’s voice for weeks on end – disembodied...”

“What the voice had to say was harder to take. The gruesome details about his mother. And all those obscenities. Sometimes it really got to me, sitting down at nine in the morning to type out one of those tirades. We worked with a pedal that plugged into the cassette player. You’d turn it on and try to type the sentences at dictation speed, never succeeding, because he tended to talk a mile a minute. Tape off to finish the sentence. Rewind, and replay to check it was word perfect. Constantly having that voice in your headphones, no, in the middle of your head. A lonely voice, not talking to anyone in particular, so therefore addressing you among others, beseeching, accusing, at times insulting. It drove me crazy. For Christ’s sake, I often thought, what kind of book is this going to be? But the publisher was keen enough. He’d already had a dummy made up. Look...”

She pulled a book out of a drawer and laid it next to the transcripts. The pages were wavy and the damp paper gave off a musty smell.

Tibbolt Satink

NOON TO NEON

The title had been done in pseudo-Greek fantasy letters. I opened it. On the flyleaf a swarm of damp, rust-coloured stains reminded me of something – I wasn't sure what, but they felt frighteningly familiar. On the title page, the name Tibbolt Satink had been crossed out and replaced by hand with "Movo". Under Noon to Neon was the subtitle "Guide to a Career as Another". 1998 had been given as year of publication. I leafed further. There was only a half a page of text.

"We used a more or less random passage from the transcriptions for the promo," said the editor. "Just to get them going. You can have the dummy as well, as long as the smell doesn't bother you."

"Not even if I had to fish it up out of the sewer! And, was it promoted?"

"Sure." From the drawer she handed me a yellowed catalogue. The bookshops subscribed well, "thanks to our best rep. We had quite a few angry phone calls once we kept postponing it."

"Why didn't it ever come out? Text a-plenty, by the looks of it."

"After posting Tape 179, the author – or, rather, speaker... disappeared without trace. He'd signed a contract, pocketed a considerable advance. But what do you do with the manuscript of a writer who's gone up in smoke? We flogged the subject to death in those last few months of '97. To publish or not to publish. Originally Satink had insisted that the transcriptions should be seen as the raw material of the book. He wanted to thoroughly revise them. But on the other hand, later on he let slip to me that the spoken text and its literal transcription would reveal his career as another – his, what did he call it, his metamorphosis. His transition from Tibbolt Satink to Movo. The text itself would be the transformation. No tinkering allowed."

"And – did you dare to present that vision to the others?"

"I saw it as my duty. But not being able to trace the author remained a problem. We asked his grandfather – a bookseller, who often dropped in for coffee – we asked his advice. The poor man. Tibbolt was living with him during those years, you see. He was numb with grief. He referred us to the parents. There we found nothing but bitterness. They flicked through the transcripts then washed

their hands of the whole project. Olle Tornij, Tibbolt's grandfather, finally died from that same grief. He was a scourge to the publisher, but he deserved better. The publishing world had lost another character."

"Almost two years after disappearing, Satink surfaced again. Not in Amsterdam, but in the news. Very prominently, to say the least. I can imagine you leaving him in peace during his rehabilitation. But later, when he was in jail – were negotiations reopened?"

"Er – no."

"Do say if I'm being indiscreet."

"It's a story of indiscretion, and my role in particular is nothing to be proud of."

"I'm not pushing you to expose it."

"Even so I'd like to get it off my chest. As I mentioned, endlessly transcribing those tapes was driving me up the wall. That, to be frank – admit it now – was mostly because of the unremitting struggle between Tibbolt and Movo. The desperate struggle of a – in my view – gentle young man who was trying to become a tough guy. I felt more and more sympathy for Tibbolt and an ever-increasing aversion to that big-mouthed Movo. Over the miles of tape, keeping them apart became increasingly difficult. That infuriated me. I was overworked. It was summer. Lucrees was on holiday. There was no one to help me. And then, one beautiful August day, he suddenly appeared. Tibbolt Satink in person. I had never met him before. Lucrees had, but I hadn't. Now the voice gained a body. On first impression he was the picture of the Tibbolt I thought I knew from the monologues, and nothing like Movo. He was a charmer. He felt sorry for me for having to type out the raging madness, as he called it. "Shall we just call off the whole thing?" he asked. I protested, of course. "You've been working on my ravings all day," he said, "so you won't be in a hurry to hear any more of my drivel. Otherwise I'd offer you a cold drink at a pavement cafe. It's a scorcher." That was how we ended up at the Jan Heuvel on Prinsengracht. A delicious sensation of playing truant. After a few glasses of cold beer, Movo

reared his head after all. But they were just words. His appearance remained that of Tibbolt. He had a kind of fragile delicacy that made me want to mother him. Even when he was making Movo's crass statements. I'm grey now, all right white, but back then I had ginger hair. He complimented me – something no one had ever done – on the combination of red hair and deep-blue eyes. I..."

"You fell in love with him."

"Not immediately. He was almost ten years younger than I was, but I knew from the tapes that women his own age didn't suit him. No, it took a few days for me to realise that I was wolfing down his voice like an addict. And he came back, more or less every other day. He'd drag me away from work to the Jan Heuvel. I sounded him out about the darker passages on the tapes. What did he mean for instance by 'death's cosy frisson'? His explanations were calm and relaxed. Nothing like the staccato delivery of the tapes. 'Those deep-blue eyes with that flaming hair around them, they make me feel peaceful,' he'd say. After a week I was literally love-sick."

"And – was it mutual?"

"I never found out. I kept putting off my own confession, for fear of rejection. He was usually attentive, charming, complimentary. But sometimes Movo would let fly. 'I'm very close now,' he would say. 'To what?' I'd ask. 'To complete metamorphosis.' I suspect that he didn't want to subject me to Movo. Or conversely, that he didn't want to take me to Movo with him. Lovey-dovey didn't go with the toughness he was trying to master. Then, suddenly, he disappeared. Friday, 5 September was the last time I saw him, at a lit-crit discussion night in his grandfather's bookshop. As usual Tibbolt was taking care of the drinks. Afterwards we stood talking outside the shop. I did my best to drag out the conversation in the daft hope of something being said. Once the last guests had left, I suggested going for a drink in the Lier, a bar in the neighbourhood. But no, he wanted an early night. He had something important to do the next day and he needed to be fit. I kissed him goodnight as casually as I could, it even landed on the wrong spot, but still it burnt a hole in my face all

night. That Saturday I spent hours watching Princess Di's funeral on TV. I couldn't stop blubbing. What if the love between those two had remained unspoken? Then Diana would now be on her way to her island grave smothered with flowers but yet unloved. I had to talk to Tibbolt. I couldn't put it off any longer. The afternoon drew to a close and his mobile was turned off. All weekend I tried to reach him. Not a thing, absolutely nothing. On the radio I heard that someone had been killed at the Hellegatsplein junction on Saturday afternoon. Identity still unknown. I was terrified. Later, the name was released. Someone else altogether. On Monday morning Tornij, Tibbolt's gramps, came round. He was at his wits' end. His grandson had stayed away two nights in a row without letting him know. No, he hadn't gone back to his parents, they didn't know a thing either. I started listening to the tapes that Tibbolt had given me on the Friday night. I didn't transcribe them at first, I was looking for clues. I found plenty, but none that cracked the case. Finally I realised what he meant by 'home care'. I kept having to stop the tape, this time because it turned my stomach. The tapes were the yield of less than a week, from Sunday 31 August to Friday 5 September. There were a lot more than in the previous weeks. The Tuesday after he disappeared a package with a few more tapes arrived at the publisher's, dictated late on Friday night and on Saturday afternoon. It had been posted in Dordrecht. The last tape – Number 179, in other words – included a personal message to me. In desperation I clung to his voice for weeks. In the end I couldn't take it any more. Lucrees had to finish the job. I broke down. I spent months at home, or rather, in bed. In the New Year I wrote to the publisher: I was willing to return to work, but only if they abandoned production of Noon to Neon. And they should realise that a book that can destroy someone mentally and physically would hardly do the name of the publishing house any good."

"Which is why the book never appeared."

"Exactly."

"And you didn't inform your employer and colleagues of the true nature of your feelings for their author?"

“It’s shameful, I know. I’m happy and relieved to have finally told someone the truth. I don’t know what it is about you, but somehow you have a way of drawing out confessions. It’s very subtle.”

“That bar you were talking about...”

“The Lier?”

“No, the other one, on Prinsengracht.”

“Oh, the Jan Heuvel.”

“Is it still there?”

“Yes, one of Amsterdam’s few remaining old-style bars.”

“May I buy you a drink there?”

“But, Professor – a youthful, distinguished gentleman like you... with an old lady like me with my white mop of hair...”

“You still have those deep-blue eyes. I should be honoured to look into them over a glass.”

“Professor, please... Oh, very well then. But let me pack your things properly first. You see, Matt Knippels is another of the Jan Heuvels’ regulars.”

She returned with a package sealed with tape marked with the publisher’s logo: a capital H formed by four free-floating right angles. Gitty Pleyte d’Ailly presented me with a form and a pen.

“A respectable woman like me would never go for a drink with an anonymous individual. Not even one who, most elegantly, hides his name behind a quotation. Fortunately I don’t need to insist, since you’re obliged to sign this receipt.”

All the triumph in her face gathered in that one soft dimple on her cheek. I bent over the form, which only needed my signature. At the time I had asked the gentlemen from NASA how I was supposed to sign my contract with them if I was no longer allowed to use my name. “A cross does seem a little paltry for someone of my lineage.”

“Go ahead and use your normal signature, for the last time. The contract only takes effect once you’ve signed.”

“I don’t know, George,” said another big shot, long dead now as well. “If the gentleman is never allowed to use his signature again, we shan’t be able to compare it to the one on the contract.”

“You’re right, Jim. I suggest that you sign with a moon, a crescent.”

I made a grinning sun of it, which they accepted wryly – in quadruplicate. The contract stipulated a ban on my using my name until 2065. A whole century, unmentionable. In the meantime, of course, I would sometimes need to put my mark on a piece of paper. In the late twentieth century, people in Holland were preoccupied for quite some time with a Water-Commission surveillance camera. I appropriated the camera’s code number as my identity.

QX-Q-8

If you scrawl the code a little and add a few curlicues, you can turn it into an interesting enough autograph. I passed the form to Gitty Pleyte d’Ailly. She peered at the signature, then put on her reading glasses.

“I’m still in the dark, Professor. You’re teasing me.”

(pp. 175-180)

QX-Q-8

For the Attention of Seminar QX-Q-8

In my day we drank in the open air. The outdoor acoustics were enough for our song. No walls to bruise us in our dance.

People in a bar, there's always something pathetic about it. They imagine they need a second living room. Their restlessness is big enough for a third, but that would have to be something beyond the bar, something past the horizon. Bars are like the coast, the beach. You're driven towards them, and once there, you don't know what next, except that you can't go any further. And why go back?

Raincoats hanging open, elbows on that last, narrow road of wood and sand, they sit on a stool and stare at the horizon – the paradise in the mirror with its ragged edge of bottles, upright and suspended. The tap is a copper cross that marks the end of the world. A stuffed crow has been clamped onto to it with its beak pointing in that same direction. The customer raises the glass he's cracked in a toast and bellows something over the breakers.

At the Jan Heuvel, happy hour was over. The customers that remained, knotted round the corner of the bar, were comprehensible only to each other. An animal with many backs, emitting a polyphony of whines and whimpers. Old Knippels was there as well, off to one side with a genever in front of him. He stared at Gitty and me for quite a while, after we sat down at a table by the window.

“Don't look,” said the editor. “He's here.”

I wasn't worried about him recognising me from the F.U.N. STUDIOS in Rotterdam. That had been at least half a century ago and hardly anyone ever recognised me anyway, even if we'd met only a week before. My mug was just too ordinary. A chameleon, but in shades of grey. I swept women off their feet, and three days later they passed me in the street without a second glance. Dump

your name on the market and your features blur like a sandstone statue in acid rain. Those were just the kind of side effects that weren't predicted on the label when I signed the contract.

"This book, Professor," said Gitty, "this critical study. I'm blazing with curiosity. Tell me more about the seminar."

The waiters here still wore white shirts and black trousers. You hardly ever saw them like that nowadays. Gitty ordered a glass of port.

"I never drink it otherwise," she said. "But since this afternoon I haven't been able to get old Tornij off my mind. When he came to the office he always drank a glass of ruby port."

"Make mine a white port," since we were going to start making sentimental choices. In his last years Mombarg had grown bloated and gross knocking back that slimy yellow rotgut.

"No, tell me something about your work first. Your current work, I mean."

While she talked, I studied Matt Knippels carefully out of the corner of my eye. He had a strange way of raising his glass to his mouth, with the foot clamped in his fist and the bowl sticking up between ring and middle fingers like an enormous sparkling rhinestone. Lips pursed, he kissed the ring – a self-satisfied pope or godfather. The man had grown terribly old. Investigative journalism must take it out of you, and then getting screwed by your chosen sources. He'd long stopped peering at Gitty and me, and only had eyes for the large package on the table between us, Hoek's logo clearly visible on the tape. Movo in swaddling clothes.

To put down the empty glass, Knippels needed to prise its sticky stem out from between his fingers.

"Here he comes," I said. "Just keep talking."

"Good afternoon, Ms Pleyte d'Ailly. Afternoon... I hope I'm not interrupting if I ask how things are progressing with that audio material?"

"Not at all, Mr Knippels," replied the editor, "but may I ask you something first? How did you know about the tapes?"

“Ouf...” The journalist leant heavily on our table with both hands. “It’s all so long ago.” He stared out over the canal. Small grey irregularities were visible in the whites of his eyes – where they weren’t bloodshot, that is – floating like lumps of leaven in otherwise immaculate bread. “It was sometime late last century. A photographer came along too... I drove down south with Satink. His car. To Helmond. Mierlo. For a reportage about prompters, something like that... I’ve written so many pieces – thousands. He had a dictaphone going all day, one of those old-fashioned squeeze things. He said he used it to record monologues, hours at a time, mostly in his car. Then I was at your offices once for something, and I saw a dummy with his name on it lying around. I suspected that it had something to do with those tapes.”

“I’m sorry, Mr Knippels,” said Gitty, looking at me. “We haven’t found anything yet. There’s less and less reason to hope. We’ve just about turned the cellars upside down.”

How wonderfully they lied, those steely blue eyes. Her fib was nothing less than a declaration of love.

“Would you mind me nosing around your archives myself?”

“If you don’t mind counting mouse droppings. Be my guest.”

The laboratory did not disappoint me. They got virtually all of the tapes going again. Don’t ask me how. Electricity, lightning and light bulbs, sun and stars, about light, I know all there is to know, from its creation to the physical formulae. But when it comes to sound I’m a layman, except for its musical aspects, of course. As far as sophisticated sound equipment is concerned, I’m as ignorant as the next asshole.

A youngster still in his twenties, wearing jeans and a dust coat, gave me a guided tour. The tapes were dried in a kind of incubation tray that could be regulated precisely to the thousandth degree. Millimetre by millimetre the flimsy tape was peeled off by a reel that rotated so slowly that its movement was

invisible to the naked eye. If necessary the detached tape was then immersed in a special cleansing bath, and dried again, and peeled off once more.

“I’ll play you one of the tapes that’s been cleaned.”

A sound system a disco wouldn’t dare to dream of. But even at full volume, the only thing that came out of the loud speakers was a monotonous drone, like traffic on a motorway, as if that was Movo’s sole gift to posterity, the background noise of his monologues, without the voice.

“This one’s been cleaned very thoroughly,” was all I could say.

He started to work his magic with switches, dials and faders, and then, coming from decades ago, the voice broke through. At first, Movo’s words were completely incomprehensible, his voice coming over dull or squeaky in turns, and distorting horribly. I covered my ears to block out the screeching and throbbing.

“That’s what the tape sounds like after cleaning and repair,” the technician explained. “Nothing but amplified speech impediment, is it? I’ll leave the rest of the restoration to the computer.”

He pressed a few buttons on the shining black panel. The voice started stuttering in every way imaginable. Red and green digital bolts flashed towards each other, up and down a column of rectangular meters. Somewhere in an acoustic dimension, Movo’s heart started beating again. Hesitant as yet.

“...nothing more depressing than Nietzsche’s Eternal Recurrence. Die ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen. Whenever I hear the term I always see the same image before me. The young Nietzsche in military uniform tumbling off his mount and incurring a festering chest wound as a result. Twenty years later the pus bursts through into his head and he throws his arms around the neck of a worn out rag-and-bone horse. Recurrence, that is the magic word – the eternal recurrence of exactly the same thing...”

There was Movo’s voice: urgent, but clear and understandable with it. He didn’t sound digitally enhanced at all. On the contrary, the naturalness of his voice stood

in almost obscene contrast to the sterility of the surroundings. So close, after more than a quarter of a century. Any moment now he could emerge from behind the shelves of equipment in all the glory of his twenty-three years.

It was too much. I had to get away from this place. I wanted the voice to myself, in the seclusion of my apartment in South Amsterdam. To avoid having to listen to what he, Movo, was saying, I concentrated on the background noise. I couldn't hear any trace of cars or motorway at all.

“What's that I hear? Would you...”

The assistant played a tune on his equipment. The voice faded to a mumble and the laboratory turned into an aviary. The warbling of birds was ear-piercing. Movo in a park?

“Thank you, that's enough, thank you. Fantastic what you've achieved with all your technology. I'm deeply indebted.”

“Wait till you get the bill.”

It was a tidy amount, and then I wanted the recordings burnt onto silver disks as well. A small fortune, but what the hell, I'm no longer the down-and-out I was when I left California for the Netherlands. I'm even thinking of buying back my name.

“Would you send the bill to the Dutch department at Amsterdam University?”

If they didn't fall for it, I could always pay cash. It turned out to be no problem at all. I gave them the box number.

“Make it out to the attention of seminar QX-Q-8.”

(pp. 336-343)

The Movo Tapes

Dimmocrassy

Knowing that I now have to tell the story of my birth, I shall permit myself a cautious thought about true democracy, the fleeting equality with which all of us enter this world. I feel, almost literally as a hot wave, the voice of Movo rising within me.

“Yes, that’s how they pay lip service to hypocritical creation, the Tibbolts among us, to camouflage their embarrassment over the crime of our birth.”

As his words wash over me, I try to get them down on the tape as best I can. Dimmocrassy, he says.

“All that eyewash about democracy, democratic decisions, they should put a fucking sock in it. True democracy has been frittered away for all time and until the end of time because we humans aren’t given any say in our conception. At the root of any concept of democracy, there it is, a pre-eminently undemocratic event: God, the World Soul, a blind Will, someone or something collaborated with our ancestors and our defenceless parents to get us born. No freedom of choice, no enfranchisement. An ice-cold fact, and we have to live with it.”

We’re under no obligation to go on. We have an inalienable right to put an end to it.

“If I were to take the liberty of ending it all, I would need to use almost unimaginable brute force against myself. Self-destruction, literally. Call that free will? I can’t half commit suicide. It’s all or nothing! Otherwise you can forget about it. You could ask yourself what kind of cynical God would hurl us out of the fertile darkness onto the earth, completely unasked, and then subsequently give us the opportunity, through thorough self-destruction, of returning to the lap of His darkness. How gracious! He’s doing us a favour! A merciful God!”

We’re also free simply to wait for death...

“...to catch us unawares, yeah. Without prior notice. We submit to an arrangement that is democratic inasmuch as we all have it coming – on passe tous à la casserole – without fear or favour...”

That doesn't exclude the possibility of democracy as a form of government.

“Oh no, Mr Addlebrain? Set your raw emotions to work for once, and not all that perfumed sentiment. You're always on about the roles of revenge and remorse. Dare for once to be plain vindictive about the things that matter. We humans do not get to choose our own existence, therefore democracy as a system is alien to mankind. Why don't you have the guts to include that position in your fabulous Manifesto for the World Strike? Then we'd be a step further down the road. Not having had any say over your own conception. If you ask me, that justifies an extremely undemocratic attitude to life. Let's not waste valuable time counting votes, sharing out rights like so much cake, endless bickering about the pros and cons of a regulation here, a bylaw there. Aren't we better off giving in to our most individual instincts and letting them loose on the world?”

But Movo, can't you see the democratic system as an intermediate solution, founded out of collective self-preservation, to keep us from having to constantly bash in each other's brains, as a way of damage limitation?

“Just as long as we quit fooling ourselves that there is such a thing as fundamental equality, that kind of blasphemous bull. Because it doesn't exist. We are totally dissimilar even in the diverse ways we react to the undemocratic nature of our arrival in this world. Perhaps I should put that differently. Outwardly they are so perversely similar, people... most have two legs, two arms, two ears and a nose. They have no choice but to create differences between them to prevent the world from becoming totally insipid. They're elated to discover an abnormality in someone else – physical or mental, doesn't matter – a hunchback with hair growing on it, a preference for baguettes with crumbly cheese scraped out of a urinal. They express their delight in torrents of uninhibited abuse, if the fun hasn't already been smothered in wordless contempt. Difference is essential. If absent, it must be manufactured. People cobble together inequality to justify

lording it over each other. With the greatest of ease, they develop social classes, caste systems, state terror. Racial theories galore, there's no end to it. Since man has no access to the consciousness of his fellow citizens, it's all the easier for him to consider himself superior. The three dimensionality of fellow humans is purely external. Where they're at their most ridiculous... You shouldn't try to inflict democracy, socialism or communism on earthlings... and not Christian charity either, systems that run counter to man's tendency to embellish the world with extreme differences. Just when he's got things neatly arranged, as unfairly as possible, along come the do-gooders – or do-badders – calling for universal suffrage and an equitable redistribution of goods and land. People were equal before, enough to make you want to puke. A superficial equality that we'd only just overcome, in a deadly game in which the antagonists were deliberately made unequal to each other.”

So things should be shared out unequally in the world...

“Exactly. History is drama. Without inequality, no drama. That's the way the gods wanted it, for their own entertainment.”

Everyday life says otherwise, Movo. In the very areas in which we can distinguish ourselves – language, ideas, appearance, behaviour, clothing – we stick to passing fads, the latest trends. We're so anxious to conform and march to the tune of a system you call alien to mankind. In essence we spend every day begging democracy to come upon us. How do you square that with your ranting, Movo?

“Democracy and democratic forms are themselves a fashion. Persistent and true, but at the same time one that constantly cloaks itself in all kinds of sub-fashions. Democracy has kept up with the latest trends, as they say. Old poison in new bottles. When it comes to fashion there's plenty of scope for manipulation. Don't forget, even the diktat of fundamental equality could have come from a most undemocratic source, a dictator. A question of the appropriate rhetoric.”

Ulrike, that was my mother's name, "just like that woman in the Baader-Meinhof Gang", she was forever hearing in the seventies. She took it as a compliment at first, but later, once she'd got a high-heeled job and adjusted her political attitudes accordingly, it got on her nerves. From then on she called herself Rike, Rike Tornij. Only my father slipped up now and then: "Ulrike". For me, an old and forbidden sound.

Autumn 1973. The socialists had come up with an oil crisis. For the time being every Sunday all of the Netherlands would leave their cars parked out in front. My mother, by then heavily pregnant, was in the habit of visiting her best friend in Sassenheim on Sunday afternoons. That 4 November she was forced to go by train.

"Relax, stay at home," said Geb. "It's a long walk from the station. In your condition..."

"I'm not due until the 26th. That's more than three weeks from now. Am I supposed to spend the whole time in bed with a hot-water bottle?"

She went. She didn't phone first. Her friend, Nathalie (later Auntie Thalie to me), was clearly surprised to see her.

"For goodness' sake, what a trip weighed down like that. I was sure you wouldn't be coming. Bart's gone to football. On the train as well."

In those days pregnant women were still called "expectant mothers" and they drank like everyone else. By her third sherry, Rike felt "a funny kind of stomach-ache, radiating into her back." Nathalie got worried, her friend was taking so long in the lavatory.

"Rike, honey," she called from the hall, "is there anything I can do?"

"Give me Bart's car keys," was the tortured answer. "It's the contractions. I've got to get to Amsterdam." She emerged groaning.

"But, love, shouldn't I just call the doctor? Or an ambulance?"

"No, they'll come from Leiden. I've arranged with the midwife to have the baby in the VU. Please, the keys."

Visible through the frosted glass of the front door, highly distorted, was Bart's red beetle.

"Of course. You're welcome to them. It's not that. It's just, I'm not sure it's the right thing to do."

"They're hardly going to arrest me if I go out on the road in this state. It's the perfect emergency."

"That's not the point. Is it responsible to let you drive to Amsterdam on your own like this? If only Bart was home. I can't leave the kids..."

"Just let me go, all right? The contractions seem to have stopped for a while."

Nathalie patted the pockets of a man's jacket hanging from the coat rack and pulled out a key ring with small keys.

"Geb will bring the car back first thing tomorrow morning."

And Rike, supported by her friend, waddled up the garden path to the Volkswagen parked at the kerb. Nathalie opened the driver's door and showed her the ignition key. Even after putting the seat back, Rike scarcely fitted in behind the steering wheel. To reach the pedals, she had to slump uncomfortably. She suppressed another contraction, then turned on the ignition.

"Is there enough petrol – to get me to Amsterdam?"

"Filled her up just last night. Look, I don't agree with this, but hang in there, girl."

"Day after tomorrow, you'll have a card through your door."

"For God's sake make it blue or pink. I hate the ones with purple edges."

Young as I am, the one thing that's always intrigued me is – distance. The distance between material locations, that's enough of a problem, but that's not what I mean. The miles between Amsterdam and Rotterdam, sliding away beneath my wheels via The Hague, I'll talk about them some other time.

I'm talking about the distance between me and the things that matter, between me and positively dangerous events, between me and occurrences that come under the heading Fate.

When Schiphol airport loomed up, I was talking about our easy-does-it tragedy. Slow but sure wins the race. There are historic and economic explanations why it's more than half a century since war and famine took place in our backyard. But why do the timeless human tragedies generally unroll far from home and hearth as well? Murder and mayhem, looting. Who can pride themselves on a murder around the corner? Sure, they got my cousin Jopie Kakes, that's true. But even when a murder's played out off the movie screens, in the harsh reality of your own neighbourhood, it still has something cinematic about it. Somehow, it's still like a story to make your flesh creep, goose-bump entertainment. When I had to identify Jopie, I was forever feeling that I was being directed on a film set. They'd ordered his drowned head from Madame Tussaud, solid wax...

The world is never in our backyard.

As far as that's concerned, the newspapers read like adventure stories as well. How am I to measure the distance between my breakfast, which I savour while reading the morning paper, and the events described in that same newspaper, events that have the pretension of being part of my reality? And one step further: how, along which roads and through which mountain passes, can I bridge that distance?

Good question. Next question.

The things that matter always happen to another, someone just as remote as the things themselves. I don't know him personally, but I know that he marries the film star, looks the Siberian tiger in the eye, and finally dies by falling down Niagara Falls which he was trying to cross by tightrope (but his rival had weighted one end of his balancing pole). The other is closer to Fate, more than that, he is one of Fate's intimates.

I'm back where I started. If I want to get away from my own backyard, and come closer to Fate, I will have to become someone else. I can put it another way: someone who wants to get rid of the distance to the things that matter needs to take on an expert other as his guide, and then become his own guide. Only then can my career as Another lead me to the interior of Borneo. If it is his fate to die of tropical fevers, he'll snuff it in my stead.

A guide like that seems to operate on his own, but he is the most faithful guide of all. He carries sahib inside of him. Not a hair on sahib's head will ever get hurt. Sahib never has to die.

Strangely enough, I have been through something that normally only happens at a great remove and always to someone else. There's still that distance though, because I have no memory of it. Mummul does; in her own way, at least. It was in the papers too, even though the reporting was sloppy and incomplete. The press always makes a mess of things.

It happened just before my birth, in a sense accelerating it. The scars on my mother's body are the proof, as are my crippled feet, but none of that brings the event any closer. Of all the world's personal disasters, this one seems the most remote. It happened to another, and this other is more of a stranger to me than everyone else combined. That observation is, once again, no help at all, because it definitely doesn't diminish my fear of death, the souvenir de mort the catastrophe left me with. On the contrary, over the years, that fear of death only seems to have grown with the increasing distance, both to the event and to the person I was.

Oh, Movo, come upon me soon...!

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The Movo Tapes

The Fairground Bishop

My high school physics teacher, Mr Flikweert, was not impressed by the concept of synchronicity.

“Flash words, that’s all. According to probability it just happened to be the time for two or three phenomena to occur simultaneously, without any mutual causal relationship. When something like that happens to some people, they’re so flabbergasted they fall back on some governing entity – organised coincidence. Crap. A hysterical reaction from people who obviously had a sheltered upbringing. Too striking for mere coincidence, they say, the ninnies. They just don’t get it. This is, after all, real contingency: one of the rare occasions when reality prostrates itself before the laws of probability. Coincidence has a chance, it doesn’t need a causal relationship, that’s all there is to it. The rest is mystification, astrology, crystal-gazing. In short, bullshit.”

In the years since leaving school, his words have come back to me often, especially on my birthday. Just imagine, the Dutch government stops all motor traffic throughout the country for one day. The odd German lorry on its way to Hook of Holland for the crossing to England is granted an exemption, as is a member of the royal family, licence number AA. Otherwise there’s just some fifteen-year-old idiot who takes the opportunity to go cruising in Dad’s station wagon. What does probability have to say about the chance of two of these vehicles colliding? Forget about the motorways, the different traffic flows are separated, unless we include the chance of someone driving on the wrong side of the road in our probability theory.

It’s beyond me. Meanwhile I suspect Dr. Flikweert is scared to death of the phenomenon of synchronicity. Another reason to trivialise it.

She told me about it dozens of times over twelve years or so, and as I grew older the details became more and more harrowing.

Just outside Sassenheim, Rike drove onto the A44, changing to the A4 at the Burgerveen junction. Nothing going the other way. No cars overtaking her. To the left, the emptiness of the Haarlemmermeer polder, to the right, that of the Westeinder lakes. The contractions were her milestones. Just before Schiphol, immediately after the Kruisweg junction, her waters broke. She could smell the amniotic fluid even before she felt it – she recognised it from her days as an obstetrics nurse. Since she could no longer get into tights, she was wearing stockings with elasticated tops, which were loose and tended to slip down. Some amniotic fluid now ran into her nylons. Warm. Cooling off fast. A tickling stream reached the back of her knee and seemed to want to go further, into her maternity shoes. She pressed harder on the accelerator. Once she had passed the Badhoevedorp exit, she'd be able to see the VU.

To the right the Schiphol control tower. A cut-glass sceptre. Aircraft, stationary and taxiing, tails of every colour, just like the flags, waving on the November afternoon. A surging contraction brought her back to the road. Baby, my baby, stay put a little longer! Movement, suddenly, a couple of hundred feet in front of her. Roller skaters, six or seven, linked by batons, an uninhibited chain on the deserted road. A few, alerted by the sound of the car engine, looked back, laughing, with no intention of surrendering the captive asphalt. They were rolling toward the shadowy entrance of the Schiphol tunnel. Soon they would have the benefit of the slope that led down into darkness.

Rike swerved around the skaters, who jeered at her, gloved hands raised, holding batons.

“Car... free! Car... free! Car... freeeeee!”

Emerging from the tunnel, on the same side of the motorway, struggled a second group of skaters, scraping up the slope on their wheels. On top of the viaduct, shining in the light of the setting sun, a big passenger jet taxied past – Lufthansa; years later she could still picture it. The two groups of skaters met,

flying into each other's arms at speed, slowing down by turning in circles two by two. Strange to think that she was about to shoot through under the aeroplane. Why weren't there any plane-free Sundays? Those things flew on petrol too, didn't they? Economic interests at stake. Of course.

Just as she was about to plunge into the darkness in her red beetle, a fireball stormed up out of it, straight at her. Screams from the skaters...

The then Bishop of Haarlem, Monsignor Compernelle, was known as the Fairground Bishop. Himself a descendant of travelling acrobats who had lived in caravans, he had, ever since his ordination, kept up a special interest in the lot of circus performers and showmen. His appointment as Bishop of the episcopacy of Haarlem did not change this. Whenever his schedule allowed, he blessed not only freshly installed fairs, but also newly erected circus tents with all the trimmings, so it would have been just as accurate to call him the Circus Bishop. You don't always get a choice, and the people have the final say.

Early on the evening of Sunday 4 November, in Uithoorn, a circus needed blessing before the start of the first show. No problem, according to Monsignor Compernelle's secretary: around that date the diocesan diary was virgin territory. Except, how was the Bishop supposed to get to a, sit venia verbo, hick town like Uithoorn on a car-free Sunday? Monsignor Compernelle was used to consecrating fairs or circuses by saying a complete Holy Mass. He took everything he needed for that purpose in his Tube Citron, a Citroën HY 1600 van. Chasubles, undergarments, stoles, chalice, monstrance, wine and hosts, all went into the back of the van. He even transported a simple altar, not too heavy, one that was easy to put up on trestles. Sealed within the relic stone was one of Peerke Donders' toenails. Cross with base, aspergillum in bucket, and a miniature baptismal font just in case. Everything was provided for. If no altar boys were available at the town where the ceremony was to take place, Monsignor Compernelle took a couple from one of his Haarlem parishes along with him. Acolytes, if necessary. His permanent sacristan generally drove the van. Even

with requisites reduced to a minimum, going by train was out of the question. There were no bearers here as there had been in the interior of Africa where Compernelle had been a missionary.

An unconsecrated circus was, in a manner of speaking, a thing unblest. The Bishop's secretary passionately lobbied the local authorities for exemption. This was no easy matter because, be honest now, what grounds were there for giving a man of God, au fond an ordinary Dutch citizen after all, permission to contravene an officially declared car-free Sunday by taking to the roads, and that in a van that was six feet wide and almost fifteen feet long? To bless a circus with an aspergillum, if you please, sir, but the audience couldn't get there by car either, so...

An employee at the town clerk's office, the clever girl, pointed out to her superior that in highly exceptional cases exemption could be granted to singers and cabaret artists contracted to perform in a distant theatre before a subscription audience. Monsignor Compernelle duly received a stamped certificate granting him permission to take to the roads in his Tube Citron on the first car-free Sunday of the oil crisis as a "performer with props".

As usual, the sacristan pulled out a map to consult the Bishop about how to get there.

"Here, the N201 via Heemstede and Hoofddorp, that's the most direct route."

"I've told you often enough, Karel," Monsignor Compernelle declared, "no Kruisweg for me. Call it superstition if you like, laugh behind my back, but come hell or high water, I am not driving down a road called the 'Way of the Cross'."

"May I point out, Monsignor, that we shall be the only traffic?"

"Not even then, Karel. No N201 for me. I have those poor little altar boys to think about as well."

"In that case, then I suggest going onto the A9 at Rottepolderplein, and then a bit further along, the A4 at the Badhoevedorp junction. The Schiphol tunnel, and then just before the intersection with the Kruisweg, left, onto a road that runs

parallel to the Kruisweg, a kind of service road. Or is that still too close to the Kruisweg for Monsignor?”

“No objection.”

The Fairground Bishop himself sat in the back with his “props”. Left over from the last morning Mass, which had been less well attended than anticipated, were enough wafers to cover the bottom of the chalice, and these he intended to lay on the tongues of the circus workers. Out of piety, he planted the ciborium, covered by a cheesecloth interwoven with gold thread, on his lap, and folded his hands around it. He sat in this position whispering prayers. Dressed in their Sunday best, the two altar boys sat on the folding seats attached to the partition and tried to stay as motionless as possible; the presence of the Body of Christ was no laughing matter. It was only when the Citroën accelerated or braked that their upper bodies swayed back and forth and they exchanged pale glances. The smell of incense irritated the mucous membranes in their noses.

After the complicated loops of the Badhoevedorp junction, the sacristan realised that he was driving on the wrong side of the road. “Well, I’ll be, for goodness’ sake, it can’t be true. I’m blowed if I’m going to drive back. There’s not another soul on the road. Monsignor doesn’t have the foggiest, he’s sitting there with his nose in his breviary... It’ll all come out in the wash soon at the Kruisweg. Stop moaning now, Karel.”

He steered the van through the gentle curve to the south-west until the sun was shining right into the cab. The Schiphol tunnel saved him from being blinded, at least as long as it lasted. Inside it seemed darker than normal. At the end there was another swirl of bright light with a number of black figures silhouetted against it. Roller skaters, on their way to the sun, which shone deep into the tunnel. Once in the light, they cast long shadows behind them. Karel reached up to swing down the small sun visor, but his hand froze in mid-air. Flying straight at him through the dazzling light was a red object. The skaters screamed...

Bizarre Accident on First Car-Free Sunday

My mother showed me the stained yellowed clippings in a bulging scrapbook. Some had taken up almost the whole width of the newspaper and needed to be folded out. In places the photos bulged over lumps of coagulated potato glue. There weren't just articles from Monday 5 November 1973, but from later as well. Attributing blame. The repercussions. Interviews with the Fairground Bishop and his driver, the altar boys, witnesses on roller skates, with Auntie Thalie, Mum's bosom friend. Even my father, who had only sat at home waiting, got to add his misplaced penny's worth. There was an interview with my mother, from a much later date, during her rehabilitation. The scrapbook ended with the court reports.

“Oh, read it to me, Mum. Does it say anything about me as well?”

“It doesn't cover everything. They can be very casual with the truth too. Here, in *Het Vrije Volk* for instance, it says that I had a miscarriage because of the accident. Now, I ask you, Tibbi. You missed out on a normal birth, but otherwise you were perfect. Apart from your poor ruined feet.”

A grainy photo showed two wrecked vehicles. A van crumpled at the front and a car of which the shape of a Volkswagen beetle was just discernible.

“Come on, Mummikins, read something. I want to know if my feet are in there.”

She read a vivid description of the deserted road system. A picnic on mattresses between two crash barriers. Even more roller skaters. A little boy who went missing and was found on the A29 with his scooter, five miles from home. A photo of a bride and groom high in the saddle on an otherwise deserted Moerdijk Bridge. Leaning over towards each other, they kiss while the groom's mare raises its tail to shoot out a volley of dung. Caption: Wedding vows without exhaust fumes?

“And what's it say here?” I pointed at the photo of an ambulance next to a group of long-legged skaters, holding tight to each other, looking distraught.

Mum stopped reading and began an account of the accident, speaking from memory, now and then absent-mindedly turning one of the scrapbook's wavy pages.

Because of the relatively high driver's seat, the Haarlem sacristan was only slightly injured. He was lucky enough to have been wearing a seatbelt as well, even though he had hesitated when putting it on: it really wasn't the day for it. Later he couldn't say how long he'd been unconscious. He guessed it was just for a moment. When he came to, an abstract crystalline pattern was spreading over the windscreen with a squeak and a crackle. Confused calls penetrated the cab from outside. Behind the crackled, frosted glass, he could see thin, distorted figures. The skaters. Sunlight on frostwork.

Karel gazed groggily at the horn at the heart of the ivory-coloured steering wheel. For the moment its function escaped him. It was a round box full of blood, you could see it squeezing out from under the lid. If he pressed it, the blood would squirt straight into his face. It was the kind of thing that belonged on Monsignor Compernelle's altar. Oh no, now he got it, it was his own blood dripping from his head onto the steering wheel and the horn.

He undid the seatbelt. The thing had slammed into his diaphragm when it locked, maybe in combination with the steering wheel. He could only breathe in short, shallow gasps.

The sacristan tried to open the door. It responded to the handle but jammed after half an inch. He slid out from behind the twisted wheel to the right, and kicked the door until it flew open, then lowered his exhausted body down from the cab. A sharp pain stabbed through one leg when it touched the asphalt.

"Karel! Thank God, you're alive!" With these words, the Bishop limped past him. His black suit was torn, his face covered in blood. Monsignor Compernelle swerved unsteadily around the wreck of a red VW. Through a jagged hole in the windscreen a human head was visible, face down on the steering wheel. The perfectly pinned up hair, light brown, showed that it was a

woman. The sacristan bent forward to see if there were more people in the car, but was distracted by the shrill sound of a crying child. Fifty feet behind the van, an altar boy was sitting on the road, staring at his bloody hands, screaming. One of the roller skaters, a girl of about eighteen, was bent over him. The other altar boy's face was scraped raw around the wide-open mouth through which he bellowed his pain to the world. His grey Sunday trousers still showed the creases pressed from his mother's iron, but blood was leaking through a triangular tear above his knee. Along with the Bishop, they had been hurled out of the back of the van. The doors must have broken their fall as they flew open, otherwise poor Karel – yeah, he was good enough for that – would be scraping them off the road with a putty knife. It wasn't such a dangerous vehicle after all, the old Tube Citron, even if the pain in his foot was so bad he was almost blacking out.

The pungent, familiar smell of incense blew towards him. Amid an array of scattered props belonging to the performer Compernelle lay the censer, thrown open and smoking. Well, I'll be blowed, the old duck had gone against every safety and religious regulation known, just to burn incense in the back of the van. What an obsessive!

“Karel!” called the Bishop, withdrawing his head from the glassless door. “She's dying! I have to give her the last rites. See if you can rescue any of the stuff! I'll take care of the wafers, if I can find them...”

Monsignor Compernelle limped back to the Citroën, lamenting the wafers that had simply leapt off his lap. Children were threatened with hell and damnation if they so much as touched a consecrated host with one of their eye-teeth, let alone what lay in store for them if they tried to prise the sticky wad off the roof of their mouth with a fingernail. And now the Body of Christ was spread all over the dirty asphalt in consecrated little circles, at the mercy of the rubber tyres of tomorrow morning's rush hour.

Dying, that woman? The Bishop and his extreme unction could take a running jump. First the worldly duties. Karel buttonholed one of the skaters.

“Which one of you is the fastest on those wheels of yours?”

There was a core group of two boys and one girl, each as tall and as fast as the other two.

“There’s a road straight from here to those buildings at Schiphol.” The sacristan scraped some change out of his trousers pocket and shook it into the hand of one of the boys. “Skate like lightning and call the Amsterdam police. Tell them we need two ambulances. If you don’t see a phone box straight away, grab someone from customs...”

They were gone already. They swung their thin legs up and over the crash barrier and skated toward the terminal with long easy strokes.

“When I was born,” my summer holiday friend Hans Kradolfer once told me, “my mum got all torn...”

“So did mine.”

“They had to sew my mum shut again.”

“Mine too. She burst right out of her skin.”

“That’s impossible.”

“No it’s not. My mother got all this new skin. From herself, from somewhere else. They didn’t even have enough thread to stitch it all up.”

“No way.”

Defending my mother against his scepticism, I gradually realised that her scars really were related to my birth. I had saddled her with a lifelong itch. My eyes moistened. The next time she asked me, I would scratch her even better, just the way she liked it. I would run my tongue gently down the deep, narrow grooves, spit was excellent for a burning itch. Now, right this minute. I felt that she needed me.

“I’ve got to go home.”