

*Magnificent and award-winning return of
the celebrated author*

JEROEN BROUWERS

Geheime kamers

Secret Rooms

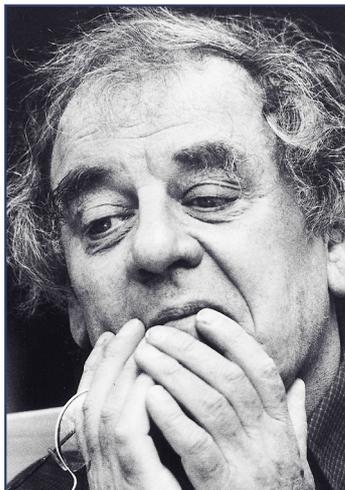


photo Katell Bertrand

Jeroen Brouwers was born in 1940 in Batavia (now Jakarta) in the former Dutch East Indies, but moved to the Netherlands after the war. He worked as an editor for the Flemish publishers Manteau before debuting with the novel, *Joris Ockeloen en het wachten* (Joris Ockeloen and the Waiting; 1967). During the 1970s and 80s, he developed into one of the Netherlands' most prominent novelists and essayists. In 1979, he published

During the 1990s, Jeroen Brouwers published no new works of fiction. In his masterpiece, the voluminous *De zondvloed* (The Deluge; 1988), the author demonstrated his mastery in devising staggering literary constructions. 'I had become a slave to my own literary ideology,' Brouwers explained in a recent interview. 'Everything had to be constructed, ornate, stratified, every detail had to have some sort of function.'

In his new novel, Brouwers's style is remarkably light. Despite the fact that the novel deals with adultery, betrayal and deceit, Brouwers has managed to clothe the story in sparkling prose. Somewhere in the book, the comparison is made with 'opera buffa'. What are the dramatic events in Brouwers's comic opera? The main character, Jelmer van Hoff, meets his erudite university friend, Nico Sibelijn and his wife, Daphne, at a funeral. Jelmer, who has been stuck for years in an unhappy marriage, falls madly in love with his old friend's wife. He writes her passionate letters, but is gradually lured into a labyrinth of deceit and treachery. For Daphne, adultery is like a secret room: 'As long as Nico was unaware of her secret, it was as if there *was* no secret. That which is unknown does not exist.'

The elaboration of the metaphor of 'secret rooms' demonstrates Brouwers's undiminished skill as a master of composition. The affair between Jelmer and Daphne proves simply to be a cloak for the real extramarital love that Daphne cherishes for a third man. By the time this last room has been opened, Jelmer has seen his own marriage hit the rocks. He is left peniless in a small flat with his young, mentally handicapped daughter. Nevertheless, *Geheime kamers* does not leave the reader feeling despondent. Jelmer's irony and self-deprecating humour keep him on his feet. In essence he is a real old-fashioned hero who stands up to the dramatic events that life sends his way.

a novel about a childhood in a Japanese internment camp, *Verzonken rood* (*Sunken Red*; 1988) to international acclaim. The book was awarded the Prix Femina Etranger after appearing in French translation. Aside from a number of essay collections and his own literary journal *Feuilletons*, the author was silent for nearly a decade. Brouwers's new novel was unexpected, but also a resounding success, which met with unanimous praise and won both the prestigious Golden Owl Award and the AKO Literature Prize 2001.

Brouwers proves that out of muck and mud, hysteria and adultery, blood, sweat and tears, something beautiful and even uplifting can blossom.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

Without doubt Brouwers's most compelling novel to date. Evocative to the very last full stop; black to the very last comma.

DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER

Beat the drums and sound the trumpets: Jeroen Brouwers has risen again.

DE VOLKSKRANT

A masterpiece.

VRIJ NEDERLAND

PUBLISHING DETAILS

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RIGHTS

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OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

Sunken Red. London: Peter Owen, 1990; New York: New Amsterdam, 1988/1992. Also in German (Nagel & Kimche, 1984; Piper, 1988), French (Gallimard, 1995), Swedish (Fripress, 1984), Japanese (Suiseisha, 2001), Italian (Ila Palma, 1998), in Portuguese (Teorema, 1997), Rumanian (1997), Turkish (Iletisim, 1998).
L'éden englouti (Het verzonkene). Paris: Gallimard, 1998. Also in Portuguese (Teorema, in preparation).



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An interview with Jeroen Brouwers

WHERE DO I BELONG?

*by Bart Vanegeren (6 May 2000, De Groene Amsterdammer)
translated by Susan Ridder*

'Brouwersdom will not grow much older than sixty,' Jeroen Brouwers once wrote. On 30 April he turned sixty. An interview in rough weather – 'My character is a labyrinth.'

It is typical Brouwers weather, grey clouds brood over the land, a dreary drizzle gusts across the sky. The powerful wind dares many a plant to bend or break. I pilot a fragrant bouquet of flowers through the impending thunderstorm. For the writer's birthday, who will be sixty on April 30th. For *Bezonken rood* (Sunken Red), a classic about the gruesome Japanese camps. For *Kroniek van een karakter* (Chronicle of a Character), a weighty Collected Letters with the supplest, funniest prose I've ever known. For *De laatste deur* (The Last Door), a collection of essays soaked in empathy for writers who have committed suicide. And for the other fifty Brouwers titles.

By the time the storm really gets under way, we are safe at a table in the writer's house, hidden behind wildly rustling bushes.

The nineties

When you were sixteen, you felt thirty, when you were thirty-five, you felt forty. And now?

Jeroen Brouwers: 'I'm beginning to feel it now. Biologically, I'm definitely sixty. It's a matter of getting used to it, we'll survive.'

The health problems of the last few years, are they over?

*'They're still with me, I have a prosthesis in my windpipe. I now buy shirts which close high around the neck, so people can't see my misery (*grins*). My windpipe was closing up, so they widened it with a pipe. If it hadn't been put in, I'd have choked long ago. The trouble with that pipe, though, is that it needs to be replaced every six months. Every time I have to go through the trouble of a few days in hospital, anaesthetic, and so on.*

It should have been replaced again in February, but I told them I didn't want to go. "I don't have the time right now, I've got a book to finish." Doctors don't understand, they believe your health always comes first. Still, they have to accept my decision, I'm simply not a very willing patient. If I really need an operation, they'll tell me at an interim check-up.'

*The deadline for this novel, *Geheime kamers* (Secret Rooms), was to be your sixtieth birthday.*

'I didn't quite make it. I still have to write fifty of the more than four hundred pages.'

Geheime kamers is about love and the impossibility of fulfilling it. What else can literature be about? It's a Brouwers novel, so it doesn't really cheer you up. Although, people who've read the part that's finished, say that it's very sad, but that they've also laughed, roared with laughter even. That's exactly what I intended.'

'Brouwersdom will not grow much older than sixty,' you once wrote. So April 30th was almost a literal deadline.

'You can't predict anything about your death. Doctors can keep you going with sticks and prostheses, and protect you in a kind of incubator, but that doesn't mean you can't step in front of a tram tomorrow and be dead anyway. My father lived to 61, and I always assumed that I wouldn't grow older than he. Nice of you to remind me, I'm suddenly aware I have one year left. What shall I do in that year? Ach, nothing, just continue to live.'

Looking back at your career, are you satisfied?

'I don't intend to sound too pedantic or conceited, but I'm quite satisfied with my work. I've never messed about and I've never been lazy. I've always done the best I could at that particular moment in time. I'm not satisfied with my *career*, though. Nowadays a writer doesn't just have to write books, he has to sell them too. You have to be able to ride the publicity merry-go-round and play the media. I don't have the character for it, but others do. That's how modern publishing ruins literature – by hyping people like Lulu Wang, Connie Palmen or Arnon Grunberg, the masses begin to think that they write great literature.'

Does it bother you, the discrepancy between stature and sales?

'I don't know about stature. Flanders is kind to me, but in the Netherlands I've been dead for a long time. I never see my name in the papers here. This is my disappointment of the last few years. Hardly anyone was interested in my magazine, *Feuilletons*, more than seven hundred pages long all together. If they did talk about it at all, it was always in a disparaging, uninterested way.'

Through the years, there have been various writers who feel they owe you. Don't you think that this shows you have stature?

'My work hasn't gone unnoticed, which is quite nice. Those writers could have chosen worse examples. Ach, a writer has to have his roots somewhere. You can't just start anywhere, as if you're parachuting into literature. But I don't get vain if I see a list of writers in the newspaper who claim they owe me.'

You're more than a point of reference, your isolation and rigorous dedication to literature have resulted in your being accorded a sort of cult status.

'Well, luckily I never noticed. It's not for nothing that I live here the way I do, in strict isolation. I keep away from every in-crowd, whether it's in Amsterdam or in Antwerp. I don't take part, I don't want to be part of it. I can imagine that that creates a kind of mystery. Who is that guy? An ascetic in a cave somewhere in the Himalayas who talks some mythical language? If that's what they believe, fine. I don't want to be easy to find.'

In 1993 you returned to Flanders. Did anything strike you?

‘When I left Flanders in 1976, it was behaving like the beaten boy. Sort of, oh, don’t hurt me, try to understand me. I knew hardly a single intellectual capable of producing competent sentences in Dutch. Twenty years on, its all changed. People are emancipated. I even think that people in Flanders speak better Dutch than those in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands one doesn’t notice that the language has deteriorated. Dutch has been attacked by a kind of science-fiction English, it’s like a virus. When I have a conversation with my twenty year old daughter, I often have to ask her what she’s talking about.’

In ‘Zomervlucht’ (Summer Flight), your only novel written in the nineties, you use the third person singular.

‘That doesn’t mean a thing. Even if I use the first person singular, it’s still a character. It’s sometimes said that my prose is autobiographical, but I don’t think so. As far as I know, what I write doesn’t coincide with reality. But sometimes people assume that that’s the case, because they’re confused by the tone. It’s very personal, so they think it can’t be fiction, it has to come from my soul. But I don’t write novels to talk about reality – that’s what polemics are for.’

So your novel production doesn’t falter because your autobiographical barrel is empty?

‘No, so long as you remain aware of yourself, the barrel is never empty. You can spin a thread from every fibre. Many threads make a sleeve, and eventually you have a shirt.

Besides, literature is more than writing novels. I’ve written a lot of essays, meditations and polemics in those ten years, and I’m satisfied with that. In Mulisch’s life too there was a time when he didn’t write novels. Looking back over Mulisch’s oeuvre, I think the books about Cuba and the sexual bastion are as important, if not better and more powerful, than his novels. I think my own essays are possibly more interesting than my novels.’

The eighties

A quotation from ‘De zondvloed’ (The Deluge), your ambitious tome from 1989: ‘I’m a useless writer, read, “a writer writing about nothing”.’

‘Of all books, it’s this weighty one embracing all themes I’ve ever touched upon in essays or novels, which asks, What’s it all about? It’s like life itself. Why are we alive? For no reason, for nothing. Period, the end.’

‘You like putting yourself in perspective. In ‘Brouwers in Brussel’ (Brouwers in Brussels), for instance, you say, ‘I assume I have no talent whatsoever.’

‘What’s talent? I don’t think talent is a gift, a gift which makes you more interesting than anyone else. You may be aware of a certain drive, for instance wanting to paint or compose. In my case, it was writing. But I couldn’t, I just messed about a bit. But if you apply yourself seriously to writing, you sometimes get something on paper. Hard work, my friend, has resulted in fifty titles now.’

Every day, every minute, every sentence that I wrote, I did my very best. If you want to call that talent, then my talent is enormous.'

The question is, at what price? In 'Brouwers in Brussel' you say, 'The production of literature aside, almost everything in my life has gone wrong.'

'It must have to do with that depletion. If you're obsessive about your work, it has to be to the detriment of your social life. Not that I'm a whinger who always wants to talk about literature, but I'm always thinking about the book I'm writing. For as long as I'm working on it, a book is like a large structure in my head. And as long as I have that structure in my head, I have to keep building, painting and polishing. It's an awful, intensely tiring existence.'

A quotation from 'Bezonken rood' (Sunken Red) from '81: 'I am one of those people who cannot be happy - sick from everlasting restlessness, sick from everlasting fear, preferably numbed by pills, preferably roaring drunk, preferably fast asleep, preferably absent.'

'I don't have anything to add (*smiles*). It's not a literary exaggeration, it's the truth. My character is a labyrinth, I've never found the way. I'm restless, nervous, frightened, insecure. Melancholic. That's why it's very difficult to be a hundred percent happy and enjoy it at the same time.'

Nevertheless, I know you as an amiable, witty man.

'When I'm talking, I'm distracted from the drudgery that's writing. It's true, I can be funny then. When I'm not writing, I'm a very amiable man. But even though it doesn't exactly cheer up my life, I have to write, otherwise I'd go mad.'

'Bezonken rood' is your best selling, most translated and most acclaimed book.

'It became special because it became famous immediately after it was published. All kinds of whingers claimed that the Japanese camps had been very different from how Brouwers described them, that they weren't half as bad. That debate, which lasted for at least six months, helped the novel enormously. It also helped that it was a *thin* novel, popular with students because it doesn't take long to read (*grins*).

It's my only book that's still alive. On my birthday, the 24th print run appears. It's also the only book which has been translated – in twelve languages. So it has to have *something*.'

Is 'Bezonken rood' your best novel?

'I don't know. Perhaps I'd choose an essay, *De laatste deur* (The Last Door) or *Adolf en Eva* (Adolf and Eva) or something like that. I still like picking up *De laatste deur*, even though it's twenty years old and is in dire need of supplements and revision. I'm quite proud of it as an achievement. After all, it was the first book in Dutch literature which dealt with suicide and was very thorough about it.'

'My tone is one of solidarity,' it says in the preface.

'My solidarity consists of sympathy, compassion for colleagues who took their lives. They were mad or unhappy, were sad for many reasons, were afraid they

couldn't write anymore, and so on and so forth. My solidarity lies in the fact that I myself suffer from those same fears, madneses, addictions, sadnesses.'

Did writing about those suicides keep you from committing suicide?

'Are you crazy? I never intended to commit suicide. You have to have a certain psychological disposition for it, which I don't have. I've been utterly miserable and suffered the greatest sorrow, but not once did I contemplate going to the village to buy a rope or a gun or jumping off the roof. You have to be born for suicide, you have to have the gene for it. I don't have it.'

The seventies

In '79 you cried out angrily, 'Let it come, beauty!' Did beauty come?

'Not really (*smiles*). I don't think it was understood. I didn't mean aesthetic beauty, I meant moral beauty, honesty, sincerity, living by your own rules, never deviating.

People didn't understand, there hasn't been an increase of moral beauty in literature. That's why, even in my *Feuilletons*, I've kept needling, teasing, poking. I'm just about the only one who still does it, albeit somewhat less vehemently than in the past. As an old writer you shouldn't attack the young, I don't think that's right. And you get a little tired after the Tour de France. Also tired in the sense of "I can formulate it, even in a funny and powerful way, but what difference does it make?" Polemic is the most disappointing genre there is.'

But your polemics have always started discussions?

'I don't think so. Take my attack on *Revisor* literature, in which I called for more beauty. The only response I got, existed of attacks *ad hominem*. They talked about the man, the messenger, Brouwers personally, but not the message. Even after my Flanders pamphlets, no-one checked-up on my claims. They called me a rabid Flemish-hater, thought I ought to get the hell back where I came from, alleged that I was a womaniser and a drunk. You can hardly call reactions like that response!'

When you left Flanders in '76, you withdrew to de Achterhoek. Was that the beginning of your best years?

'In 1976 I finally became a real writer. I stood by the window, thinking, Here I am, 35 years old, and I said to myself, "If I don't start now, I never will". I sat down at my table, picked up a pencil and started writing. That's how it still is today.

'76 to '86 were my golden years. I could draw easily from the reservoir I'd created during a strange writing explosion in the preceding years. I'd suddenly started filling pages with a passion I didn't know I had. I had inspiration, insight, my god, it kept coming. I didn't know what it was about, but I let it flow; parts of novels, pieces of essays, meditations, polemic, memories, diary notes. It became a huge pack of paper, a suitcase full of text, which I took to Holland.

When I really began to write, I used the pack to compose *Zonsopgangen boven zee* (Sunrises above the Sea) and *Het verzonkene* (The Sunken). Some parts also ended up in *Bezonken rood* (Sunken Red) and even in *De zondvloed* (The

Deluge). The pack itself was unpublishable. If they'd found the suitcase under my bed after my death, their reaction would have been, Jesus Christ, what a scatter-brain! He must have been drunk when he wrote all this.'

The sixties

In 'Brouwers in Brussel' you call 'Groetjes uit Brussel' (Greetings from Brussels) from '69 'the book of liberation'.

'I had written two collections of stories and a novel, but I didn't like them. There were millions of stories of the type I was writing at the time. Besides, all you needed to do was switch on the television and you had a story. I wanted something different, and in *Groetjes uit Brussel* I finally found it. I created a hybrid, I embellished my stories with memories, meditations, thoughts, essay fragments.'

Is it a coincidence that you discovered this hybrid in the melting pot that was Brussels?

'If I'd never lived in Brussels, I wouldn't be the person you're talking to. The city has had an enormous influence on me, particularly because of its array of colours, cultures, languages and races. Brussels doesn't have character, yet it acquires one through all its characterlessness. It's like patches of fur on a cat, a bit of red, a bit of black, a bit of white. The fur itself has no character, yet it defines the cat.'

At the time, you moved in a small circle of young artistic people who – watch the corners of my mouth – called themselves the Flemish 'angry young men'.

'You're allowed to smile, I now pronounce that name with the same snigger as you. But you shouldn't place it too much in perspective. Weverbergh achieved something with his polemics in *Bok*, Herman J. Claeys with his café De Dolle Mol and his Free Press Bookshop. That was something. The Weverberghs, Leuzes and Spelierses found their father in Louis Paul Boon. It was through them that he eventually received the recognition which, of course, he was due much earlier.

In De Dolle Mol people didn't just drink and whore, we really discussed social change. We ploughed, as it were, through all social acquisitions, everything had to be done differently. There was definitely an ideology, an idealism there, and it did change something. Meanwhile, history has ironed it over, but it was something.'

1964 was a turbulent year; your first novel was published, you married, you lost your father and moved to Brussels. You wrote about all of it, except about your father.

'I did write a wonderful portrait of him, didn't I? *Niemand, absoluut niemand* (Nobody, Absolutely Nobody), the final part of *Het vliegenboek* (The Fly Book). But I didn't feel close to him or my mother, I never did. I wrote more about my mother, because during my early childhood she was the one closest to me and was longest with me. We were in the Japanese camp together.

I only got to know my father after the war. He came from Tokyo, where he'd been a prisoner. There he was all of a sudden, and my mother said, "That's papa". I, a six year old boy, said, "Hello, Sir". I never knew the man. We arrived in Holland

in '48, he only came three years later. I didn't really get to know him then either, because I was sent to boarding school.

I never felt the need to get to know my father. From my sister and brothers I hear he was a friendly, amiable, open man, but that's not how I knew him. On the contrary, as far as I knew him, he stood in my way. He thought I was strange, the ugly duckling in his brood. I had to forget about my ambition to write, I had to learn a proper profession. He died in '64, but he did read my debut, *Het mes op de keel* (Knife at Your Throat). He was so embarrassed about its immoral and unchaste contents, that he asked me to adopt a pseudonym. Because it was *his* name that was sullied. That was my dad. Should I love a man like that?'

Kees Fens and Marcel Janssens, the most eminent Dutch and Flemish reviewers at the time, savaged 'Het mes op de keel'.

'Marcel Janssens I didn't care about, but Kees Fens was the manager of Olympus, he held the keys and decided whether you were allowed in or not. Obviously, I wasn't. He made mince-meat of me. Of course, I was devastated. But the urge, or what we called talent earlier, was stronger. Besides, during that time I also received a pat on the shoulder from Herman Teirlinck, a great writer to whom I still take my hat off, wig and all.'

You fathered two children in the sixties.

'Of course, I was much too young, a post-teenager. But that's how it was in those years, you married and had children. You only needed to have dinner with a girl, and you started to collect pillow cases and wash cloths with the trading stamps that came with washing powder. I had a Catholic upbringing, completed by a Catholic marriage. You were supposed to start procreating immediately, so the children arrived almost immediately.

That doesn't mean that Nel, my first wife, didn't always stimulate me. I've always had very good wives. Nel was crazy about literature in the same way I was. She also taught me how to spell. When I started writing, I didn't know that "ik vind" is spelt with a "d". She's a qualified librarian, in some senses better read than I was. She also got far in publishing. When I left Manteau, Nel was hired by them, and she's now head of Children's Books at Querido.'

The fifties

In '59 you joined the navy? I was surprised to read.

'Ten years later, I wouldn't have joined the army, but in those days no-one refused to do their military service. You were called up to go, and you went. Actually, I was lucky. The navy is the jolliest bit of the army. They were a bit more relaxed than the rest of the army, with all those guys who've travelled the world and had adventures in sea ports. Of course, I never saw a sea port myself. I had only one sailing placement, as it was called, a short stay on a moored frigate in Vlissingen. The sailing consisted of going up and down the estuary at high and low tide. That's how far my nautical adventures got (*smiles*). But it was cheerful.'

Is that where you learned to drink?

‘You bet, although there wasn’t much to learn. But that’s where it started. My god, by the bucket. You were bored as hell in those barracks, and beer was cheap. So every fifteen minutes you didn’t have anything to do, you drank.’

And that’s what you kept on doing.

‘Oh yes. I feel very happy drinking myself off this world now and then and to be free of everything going through my head.’

But you didn’t drink during your happiest period.

‘I was forbidden to drink. It was the condition for happiness. Josefien said to me, “If you continue drinking, I’ll leave you.” It stimulated me not to do it, because I cared more for her than for drunkenness. I was pleased to find that it made my work easier.’

Then why didn’t you try to keep it up later on?

‘I’m still trying to keep it up, but I just can’t. Why don’t I stop smoking? I stopped smoking five minutes ago. Ach, it must be in the genes.’

‘Het mes op de keel’ (Knife at Your Throat) bears witness to a literary existence. Where did you become so well-read?

‘At boarding school there were no letters except in church and study books – no literature, no newspapers, nothing. When I was discharged at seventeen, I went to the Delft library and began to read at random, starting with A – Bertus Aafjes and W.H. Auden. After that, I kept reading. I read everything, because I wanted to know what literature was. That’s how, for a several years, I consumed a mixture of both ripe and unripe, until I began to develop some insight. When I read *Archibald Strohhalm* (Archibald Straw), Harry Mulisch’ first novel, I was bowled over. I didn’t have a clue what it was about, but I knew, this is the source, this appeals to me, this is my music, this I can smell, I have something to do with this. Around the same time I saw a performance of Dylan Thomas’ *Under the Milk Wood*, translated by Hugo Claus. I was instantly enchanted by the language. I devoured collections such as *Atonaal* (Atonal) and copied poems by Lucebert, purely out of a desire to know it all. The things you do to lay a foundation’ (smiles).

You have always claimed that you knew you wanted to become a writer at sixteen. So that was before you began to read.

‘I wrote before I read. I wrote a lot at boarding school; essays and, for fun, serials which I supplemented daily and let the others in my class read. And every Sunday you had to write a letter home. “Dear Parents,...” We had to fill two sheets on both sides, and at the bottom I had to print “Your loving son Jeroen”. I was a good boy, and good at writing those letters. However, I never received a reply from my parents, and that’s when I began to gradually change these letters into messages to myself. They turned into diary notes. That’s how you become a writer.’

Why were you sent to that horrible boarding school in the first place?

‘My parents were too busy, my father was the manager of a large hotel in Maastricht. They just didn’t have time for me. Later, I was told that I was contrary and unmanageable and that they didn’t know what to do with me. That’s how I ended up at the boarding school. As opposed to my sister, who was good.’

The forties

In ‘Bezonken rood’ (Sunken Red) it says that your experience in the Japanese camp wasn’t terrible.

‘Between the ages of three and five, you take everything for granted. A child doesn’t ask itself what’s going on, a child lives the way people appear to live. Only later did I realise what was going on.

I do remember, though, that during times of panic or stress, I threw incredible tantrums. Of course, in those camps all kinds of things happened. For instance, your mother is taken away. I remember I threw a tantrum when a covered truck came down the street and picked up all the women. But I don’t remember, for instance, ever being hungry. If hunger threatened, my mother was always so good to give us little mouthfuls of her portion of rice. It’s not for nothing that in the novel I call her “pelican”.’

It doesn’t make your hatred of her any more comprehensible.

‘In the camp, we were two people in one, we weren’t going to desert each other. But what did she do as the crisis was over and we were in Holland? She put me in a boarding school, which for a child of eight is like a prison camp surrounded by barbed wire. It was a replacement of the Japanese camp with similar walls, discipline and punishment.

That’s when our relationship began to crack, and it never healed. I felt betrayed and I never forgave my mother for it. The other part of her betrayal consisted of her showing no interest whatsoever in the development of my character or in anything I produced. I kept sending her my books until she died, but they remained unread on a Jeroen shelf above her bed. This was confirmed by my sister, who stayed with my mother until the end. I didn’t see my mother for the last four years. I’m not going to be pathetic about it. I didn’t know my parents, I don’t love my parents. Period.’

You never returned to Indonesia.

‘I don’t like nostalgia tourism, going back to places of the past. It’s empty sentiment, you may as well dig up your dead mother. Besides, there’s nothing there for me. What I imagine is still there, won’t be.

If we are talking about going back to places where I was happy, I’d go to Borneo, where we spent just over two years after the war. That was paradise, or at least that’s how I’ve begun to imagine it. Because of course it was chaos. Everything was bombed, there was nothing to eat. We lived in a straw hut, and immediately behind us was the wild, tropical jungle. We weren’t allowed to go there, of course, because it was very dangerous. But I went secretly anyway. The snakes, the monkeys, the birds and everything that grew, that was my world. My parents thought – probably rightly so – that I was running wild. If I was a hopeless child, then the jungle is to blame.’

In Indonesia they called you 'totok,' in the Netherlands 'katjang'.

'Whatever I did, I didn't belong. And it stayed that way; where do I belong? With Dutch literature, or with Flemish literature? Am I a Dutchman, or do I belong in Indonesia?

This schism has determined my character. Don't think that in '48 we were welcomed back to the Netherlands with open arms. We're talking about the colonial times. There were Dutchmen living in Holland, and Dutchmen living in Indonesia. They were different peoples. They lived in different worlds. People from Indonesia thought differently, lived differently. They were more laid-back, used to servants and a certain degree of wealth. In Holland people were bourgeois and prim.'

'In Het verzonkene (The Sunken) you quote memories from before your third birthday. Do you have a remarkable memory?

'This novel is about the time when I was unaware of being alive, about what is sunk. But I do remember our swimming pool and that at some point the gardener jumped in to get a stop out. I also remember my grandfather's mynah. My grandfather was a very shy man, who wanted nothing to do with anyone, and therefore communicated with the bird (*smiles*). The last thing he did when he was taken to the camp was to open the mynah's cage. But the bird didn't know where to go, and returned to the cage. That I remember.

I was happiest when I didn't have language. It's a wonderful state to be in, isn't it? You live, you consume, eat without realising it. As soon as you begin learning a language and become aware of things, that unconscious innocence disappears.'

You were born on Queen's Day.

'When I was young, it was the crown princess's birthday, not Queen's Day. But they did celebrate that day in Batavia. For instance, they drank orange bitter. I remember sitting on my mother's arm when a parade filed through the street, including a serpentine Chinese dragon that was carried by tens of people. My dad said, "Our little fellow was lucky to be born on such a festive day." Just then, it started pouring. The Monsoon had begun, and everything was washed away' (*smiles*).

Who told you that when you were born, your fist came before your head?

'My mother, to prove that I was already contrary in the womb.'

Sample translation from

***Secret Rooms* by Jeroen Brouwers (Amsterdam: Atlas, 2000)**

Translated by Arnold Pomerans

The bar of the Memphis Hotel, dominated by a pistachio-green iron sphinx and with the list of drinks on offer presented in imitation hieroglyphics, contained such a crush of people making such an ear-splitting din that Daphne, wearing her black glasses, hands on her ears and her mouth open wide like the screaming figure in that painting by Edvard Munch, immediately turned and fled.

At reception she asked for her key and ordered a bottle of Veuve Cliquot and two glasses, and did they have any caviar, that's to say, real caviar? No? Nor the widow's brand of champagne either? What *did* they have, for heaven's sake?

I watched her from a distance, her calves, her backside, the way her white hair fanned out as she shook her head with impatient little jerks. Using the power of her voice to the full, she stood there acting the VIP, which half impressed me even as I turned away in embarrassment. In the adjoining bar, the glaring light flashed off, on, off, on, to the thumping beat of the latest rock music, so that her figure in the leather jacket and the fussy little dress assumed the unreal and somewhat ghostly appearance of those gorgeous girls and young women in the flickering films from the beginning of cinema.

She would be complaining to the organisation at whose invitation she had come to this backward fishing village. Was this primitive hut really the best place to stay in this one-horse town? Couldn't they at least make sure that the radio – a fluttering gesture with her fingers in the direction of the source of the noise – was turned down, so that she could concentrate on her scores in peace?

She turned her back on the hotel clerk, and the young man quaked as he watched her stalking to the lift, her glasses pushed up on her forehead and the shabby little bag on her arm putting not the slightest dent in her display of airs and graces.

The impression of quaking may have been due to the flashes of flickering light, which rendered people and objects visible for no more than half a second at a time. With the key ring on her index finger pointing straight at the lift button, she advanced towards me – during one of those half seconds of bright light I saw her give a sardonic little smile and wink.

In the lift, as it left ground level, she fell against me, roaring with laughter, hands clasped around my neck. Joke, she said. As the high-flying daughter of a village schoolteacher she would sometimes take pleasure in knocking down a pawn or a bishop as the queen might in a game of chess, rendering them defenceless. Tomorrow that boy will get a twenty-five guilder tip from me, she declared.

You treat people as if they were yo-yos, I was tempted to say. Push them away, pull them back, over and over again. I too felt like a toy to be thrown out by her and then hauled back. But I kept my mouth shut. The lift had already stopped, the steel doors had slid apart, and the waiting couple must have caught a glimpse of Daphne letting go of me. During her embrace, I had not dared to put my hands on her behind to pull her closer to me. *Quod licet Daphne, non licet Jelmer.*

Room 47. A vast expanse with a bed like an immense white sandbank at low tide in a sea of mainly navy-blue soft furnishings. A chocolate on each pillow. A three-piece suite. Writing desk. Radio, television, telephone, refrigerator. Blue bathroom, soaps, shampoos. Subdued light everywhere, reflected in the hotel monogram, repeated to excess on the furniture and other objects, gleaming like gold: a sphinx and an ornamental M, wreathed in laurel – peculiarly ugly and, moreover, historically unjustified. Luxury, the scent of decadent overindulgence, and yet under every piece of furniture the lurking phantom of boredom, in every mirror the leprous shadow of loneliness.

I stood bashfully at the door of this palatial room in which Daphne was moving around with the practised disdain of someone used to better things. A large and showy bouquet had been placed on the low refectory table in the middle of the plush lounge suite; the card, which she read out, said, “Welcome. Your presence does us great honour. Polymnia Vocal Arts Society.” That’s the club where I’ve got to do the judging tomorrow and the day after, she added. An equally lavish floral creation

stood on the writing desk; she caressed its accompanying card with her eyes, which brought about a little smile and even a fleeting touch of red in her cheeks.

She opened the French windows, which apparently gave onto a small terrace with cane chairs, then beckoned me with outstretched hand to follow her outside. As I did so I took a quick look, unnoticed by her, at the card she had not read out:

“*Congratulations. Love. J.*”

What was that congratulating her on?

“J”?

I had, I felt, stumbled onto the set of a soap opera, the one to which Paula was so addicted, dreaming away with her back turned on her everyday cares, including her husband.

Leaning on the railings, we looked over the teeming crowds on the promenade below towards the start of the blackness further away which had to be the sea, breathing audibly. For the umpteenth time the beam from the lighthouse swept over us, momentarily setting off the white of Daphne’s face, hair, hands; the clock of a church nearby announced the time with bronze strokes, unpleasantly harsh and impossible to ignore, so that every quarter-hour we were taken by surprise and grew more and more depressed.

Shall we go downstairs again, my angel, Daphne suggested, and walk into that darkness in front of us and keep straight on going, past the breakers and then step by step down into the depths, never to come up again? In her most beautiful singer’s voice, siren’s voice, mermaid’s voice.

Why do you call me angel?

Because she felt so unthreatened and safe with me, she said, just as the rotating beam of the lighthouse once again circled over us and touched her eyes.

Nowhere in the Good Book is there a mention of an angel practising any kind of water sports, I said facetiously, although her suggestion filled me with fear, sudden, flashing bursts of white fear. Much as the gently sighing blackness stretched out before us was lit up by the brilliance of the pointing, constantly revolving finger of light. Above this blackness, the cabbalistic whirling of the stars; in the depths of this blackness, the passing ships’ lights sliding by, now visible, now gone. Every star, every glimmer of light filled me with fear. Of what? Something unnamable.

Besides which, I'm a good swimmer, I added. I've got all the swimming certificates and can keep not just me, but you, too, ma'am, above water.

That's why I feel so safe with you, my guardian angel, sighed Daphne, the back of her hand against her forehead like Sarah Bernhardt, her other hand gripping mine and squeezing it so hard that I could hear my knuckles crack.

Hanneke, when she was about three years old. One unguarded moment, in mid-winter, she must have slipped on the ice-covered gangplank and dropped soundlessly, head over heels, into the ditch. At first I paid no attention to Nonja's warning barks; the still-playful animal sounded the alarm at anything that moved: frogs, field mice, beetles, autumn leaves. Only when I saw the dog plunge into the water through the glass-thin ice did I grasp that something was wrong. Hanneke was lying with outspread arms and legs facedown in the ditch, motionless, her little red jacket puffed up. As the air escaped from it she sank, then rose up again, sank again and was in danger of ending up between the boat and the bank of the ditch. Howling like a human being, the dog moved helplessly round her body, thrashing about wildly; my swimming certificates were of no help as I stood in the water up to my chest, the cold like a crushing pair of icy trousers around my belly and legs, being sucked into the mud where my shoes had to be abandoned. When I grabbed her, she *bit my hand*, screaming, and started to hit me in the face with both fists and to kick at my crotch with both feet, whereat I, daughter in arms, disappeared under the water. Freezing cold, stagnant, stinking, sucking, foul water, that's what death is like, as I've known ever since. I managed to hoist myself up on the bank by the roots of some reeds, the child's teeth clamped so unshakably onto my hand that I could hear my knuckles crack.

I am not all that keen on drowning, I said. Not even among luminous fishes and surrounded by the sweet sounds of the sea. If I have to die and am given a choice, then I would prefer some other way. In my sleep, during a comforting dream.

Daphne said: You swallow a handful of pills, then swig a whole bottle of vodka or something like that. You can bet on it, you'll fall asleep and never wake up again.

I, with a laugh: Pills? I've got a whole shopful of Valiums. Hundreds, a small fortune in pills. All on prescription from Professor Sickbock, who boasted at dinner

how proud he was that they had done me so much good. I never took a single one. Instead of hanging on to them, I should have thrown them into the ditch as well.

Hang on to them anyway, said Daphne.

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and she pulled her hand away with a small guttural sound of surprise, then walked inside on her long legs; I could see her body through her dress against the light.

In the door stood a nineteen- or twenty-year-old boy with a lot of yellow in his hair, which looked as if it had been dragged backwards with a harrow. Dressed in some sort of livery, with a black-and-yellow striped waistcoat. A silver tray in his hand raised to shoulder height; on it a silver ice bucket in which stood a bottle of champagne with the widow's trademark as demanded by the diva. Three glasses, with a red rose in one of them.

From a gentleman on whose orders I am to tell you that he is an admirer of yours, madam, the boy said deferentially.

An admirer, Daphne cooed. Didn't he send a card? How intriguing. Who is this charming benefactor?

I did not speak to the gentleman in person, madam.

Rummaging about in her plastic bag, she brought out a leather wallet, from which the waiter received a banknote, which he tucked in the front pocket of his bee's waistcoat. He put down the tray, uncorked the bottle, soundlessly of course, and retreated backwards to the door.

With a respectful bow he said: Good night, Mrs Uitwyck, and to my surprise he added: Good night, Mr Van Hoff.

I asked him how he knew my name. From William the Silent College, he explained. History. You told us some exciting stories.

So there was to be nectar in crystal for the two of us after all. She filled the tall glasses.

We ended up on the bed. Sitting on the foot at first, each holding a glass. Then resting on our elbows, turning towards each other, lying on the beach-white bedspread, with the tray, the bottle, the rose between us. Looking into each other's eyes. After that there was nothing between us any longer, and the sinking, drowning, suffocating, gorging death could begin. Every minute, or several times a minute, the

beam from the lighthouse crossed the room. Every quarter of an hour the church clock sounded. Then suddenly, with a thundering noise that shook everything in the room that was not nailed down, including ourselves, aeroplanes flew overhead, another equally great distraction. Had these aircraft been circling over the sea waiting for the storm to abate and for permission to land? Paula, too, staring into A. Weldon's lenses, must be able to hear this racket. The Effata children must be listening to it as well, getting out of their beds and running through the corridors like ghostly chimpanzees, colliding with one another. What would Gonneke be doing? Looking at the streaks of light in the sky as she brought in those special cacti which, in contrast to other sorts, were freshened up by a downpour? "If you don't say anything, it's as if nothing has happened."

Come on, concentrate, calm down, now that an old dream is promising to come true, try to breathe in the same rhythm as your beloved, the droning in the heavens is bound to stop.

In the little dress, cloth buttons at the back, I read the Giorgio Armani label. Underneath this garment the snowy whiteness of Michelangelo's marble – a girl's body, though it belonged to a forty-year old vamp. Such seemingly young breasts that it looked as if the nipples had yet to bud; in a different shade of white they lay sunken in their little hillocks. I was not allowed to touch them with my mouth; she pushed my head away. Later, another time, she told me that she had refused to give her infant son the breast, because "that sort of bond" was far too close. Months of lugging him around had been quite enough; she had not wanted to be sucked dry for months to come. Nico had taken on the task of preparing the bottles and giving the baby his milk and baby food. From that self-same Nico I had learned during our student years that if a girl or a woman lets you touch her breasts, she's already decided to let you go further, believe me, you greenhorn. I believed him, had never forgotten his lesson and was reminded of it by a flash of association now that I was lying on a hotel bed with his naked wife. Not with my mouth, and certainly not with my hands, it was just with my eyes alone that I was allowed to fondle her small breasts before she laid her hands over them like shields. Her skeleton was visible under her almost diaphanous skin.

Do you think I'm ugly? she asked in a whisper.

Ugly? What gave you that idea? I couldn't help whispering myself.

You don't you think I'm too thin?

I think you're magnificent, I love you and I love your slenderness.

I, Sheherazade's brother, began to tell my beloved a tale in a hushed lover's voice:

There was once a man whose ideal love had to be as flat, as thin, as even and as straight as a plank. She could have no prominent breasts or swelling buttocks, preferably no breasts or buttocks at all, nor a pronounced nose. On one of his travels through the world he had met such a beauty, whose body, moreover, was completely devoid of hair, in addition to which she had been ordained no nipples at all, however tiny, and no buttocks, not even the cleft that in normal human beings divides their posterior in half. By the light of a lamp, this succubus, white as a sheet, became transparent and changed into a skeletal figure reminiscent of Holbein's *Dance of Death*. If she lay naked on her back in the garden under a blazing sun then she disappeared completely in the glare from that heavenly body and could only be located if she was reading by the opened book floating detached in space, which as well as a shadow cast a reflection in the upturned lenses of a pair of sunglasses that also materialised out of nothing. She was so thin that when the man coupled with her, he could feel the tip of his member thrusting straight through her against the mattress.

I could tell exciting stories. That at least was something.

During my mythological fantasy an ever-broader smile had appeared on her face and I saw her eyes move beneath the closed lids, as if she was in some kind of rapid-eye-movement sleep and was undergoing a pleasant experience. That she was nevertheless fully awake and even with her eyes closed continued to register and stage-manage things to her satisfaction became clear when I brought my mouth close to her flat stomach, my lips pursed towards the small knot of her navel. Her hands opened there like a lotus flower, into which my face disappeared, enfolded in her quivering fingers. Thus she allowed me to dream, in the warm, gentle, scented darkness of the palms of her hands, about the caresses I must not bestow on her even though it seemed as if she had lain down to receive them. Below her throat, from which she issued the stream of virtuoso bel canto, her compelling song, music that

filled ships' companies at sea and other wanderers, travellers and loners with nostalgia and lust, my mouth was plainly forbidden to touch her. In my twilight state I heard her say: Do you know, Jelmer darling, that I've been to bed with you once before? This piece of news made me go rigid with shock. No, I did not know that, and I thought it impossible that I would not have remembered so momentous an occasion.

The morning after the night when Nico was so furious with me for talking to you over the telephone, she said.

Having roamed through the town for the rest of that night, caught up in a mood of terrible distress, and having stared at the river from the bridge for a long time wrapped in her heavy coat, she had returned home only to see Nico, blind drunk, go upstairs and heave himself into bed. Exhausted herself she had lain down next to him, although that same morning she was due to attend a costume rehearsal for a Janáček opera. Nico had wrapped his arms and legs around her, clasping her as a drowning man might clasp the trunk of a tree, while she was repulsed by his tongue inside her mouth, the stench of alcohol and sweat on his body, his clumsy groping, kneading and squeezing. She was not strong enough to break free and finally resigned herself to being overpowered by him and having him thrust himself inside her. I shut my eyes, she told me, turned my head away and let him get on with it for the sake of peace and quiet, but I imagined myself elsewhere, out of that room, away from that bed and that panting man, whose penis shrank quickly anyway, after which he continued to lie on top of me with his full weight and fell snoring asleep. In my imagination, I was in a room in some romantic but slightly creepy castle belonging to Louis of Bavaria, the kind Walt Disney would put later in his *Cinderella*. I was lying in a bed of clouds. With you. And we abandoned ourselves to love. I imagined that it was not Nico who was on top of me and who I could feel inside me, but you....

This beguiling picture made my heart begin to thump as pastel colours floated through my brain, but what good was it to me now? I was still fully dressed and she neither did nor suggested anything to change that situation. She lay there motionless like a living corpse in her asparagus-thin and asparagus-white nakedness, breathing gently while I did not dare undo a single button of my shirt – instructed and finally broken as I had been by earlier girlfriends from the second feminist wave, who had

drummed it into me that over-presumptuous concupiscence amounted to egoistic macho harassment, something the modern emancipated woman abhorred. There is much that is no longer acceptable. Since, moreover, I was not allowed to kiss her where I wanted, and she, by announcing that the condoms would be staying in their packaging, had obviously decided to give up on the work in hand, I felt and behaved in a doubly diffident manner. She was no Gonneke, whose preference (“I screw like a bloke”) was for carrying things capably and resolutely to their climax, considering it a task that might demand time and concentration but did not have to be performed like some long-drawn-out rite. “We give each other pleasure by doing it, comfort each other a little, it breaks through the fog.” She could say this as if she were reading a legal document. This was no Gonneke, a friend of warm flesh and blood, this was Daphne, of another order, a different race, in whose presence I felt shy, embarrassed, slightly nervous, and not without the fear that had largely governed me all my life and that had to be fought with pills.

What a lovely dream, you and I entwined in love, I said. I, too, have imagined that more than once. I’ve been in love with you for as long as I’ve known you.

She opened her eyes, smiled. Do you think I haven’t always known that? You told me that first in Nico’s presence, the day we got married. Nico and I were sitting hand in hand on low chairs next to the brand-new tomato-red oil stove in our front room, which was full of people, laughing, drinking and eating. You appeared from somewhere and knelt down romantically beside us, stroked my hand and recited a poem to me, with the repeated coda of how you grieved for a love that had become unattainable, of whom you could only dream from that day on.

Why does one remember or, as the case may be, forget some things but not others? And how is it that the same memories are passed on differently by different people? I had retained in my memory quite another picture, grown blurred, of this incident: I recited that poem, of my own making, throat choked up, in their long, high-ceilinged, white passageway, of which I can still describe the arabesques on the floor tiles in detail. I was standing there alone with her, away from the celebrations, her back pinned to the wall beside the telephone, her lapis-lazuli eyes fixed on my lips from which the incense of my poetry sprang, and it was not I who stroked her hand, but she who stroked mine. After that she had given me a passionate wet kiss on

my mouth, whereupon Nico suddenly appeared in the kitchen doorway and immediately turned his back on us having seen what he did see. End of *my* memory, but of course I did not contradict her, her version was so appealing.

I asked: shall I get undressed as well?

No. With that little smile of hers she moved her head from side to side on the pillow again. The chocolate slid down into her hair and stuck there.

Another time, she decreed. Maybe we'll have time tomorrow, that competition doesn't start until late in the afternoon.

The church clock produced a loud clang; it had to be a quarter to the hour. At the same time she said: I saw you naked once, anyway. Now I've shown myself to you like this, we're quits.

If what's inside my head were a computer, then a virus could strike it and swallow up the information stored inside in a matter of a few seconds, as I had once seen happen in a spy film. The film itself hadn't interested me, but the phenomenon it dealt with had shaken me and suggested the idea that if a man dies, all his talents, learning, knowledge and philosophical insights also fall prey to destruction, oblivion, futility – without all that intellectual material being transferred to the computer in the head of someone still alive, capable of expanding the achievements of the deceased into an even better endowed treasure trove. The virus in my cerebral computer was plainly at work already, especially in the memory department, where recollections seemed to get distorted, fragmented and wiped out.

Don't you remember?

She reminded me of the voyage of discovery made by Nico and me in the Ardennes, a quarter of a century or even longer ago. You were lying with your teeth chattering in your sleeping bag, which was completely soaked through, she said. You had taken a dip in that foul stream. You looked like some fossil that had been dug up. A lump of grey clay, covered with thousands of sticky little eggs or something, which you scratched open, only to have them swell up again immediately afterwards. Burning pain. Mad with itching. Your insides all upset.

The story caused me the same embarrassment now as it had years ago. I, in that state, naked, on all fours and grunting like Nebuchadnezzar in his madness, unburdening myself of vomit and liquid faeces in front of her.

Forgotten? I must have wiped it from my consciousness. Dr A. Weldon, the psychologist, would have called it repression – which of course was just another effect of the virus.

Should I turn off the light now so that she couldn't see me in the dark, couldn't look at me? Shouldn't she in fact become transparent now and disappear completely, dissolve into perfumed vapour and in that state evaporate over the nocturnal sea where now and then, far away, you could hear the boom of a ship's horn? The fate of Echo, the nymph who pined away until only her voice remained.

I looked back still further on my total humiliation, and thought of the turd. Squatting in the water lapping round my buttocks, I could feel it, brushing against my testicles, shooting out from under me and bobbing away before my eyes in the water and then going under in a place where Daphne, or her mental image, would appear a little later. She strode through the stream, now transformed into liquid sunshine, in the form of pure light – transparent like the Holbein woman from my story just now that I had half invented and half not. Out of the sparkling, befouled water she moved towards me, as if to ascertain the progress of my putrefaction.

I remember it now, I said. Far better it had remained buried in my memory. It must have left you with a lasting physical aversion for me.

At the same time I thought: Would she have seen me like that in her mind's eye when she imagined that she was holding me rather than Nico in her arms and between her thighs? As a gruesome vision to remind her that there are even more repulsive male bodies than that of the sweaty, befuddled, leaden husband whose screwing she had to put up with? Pray she does not remember lying under Jelmer van Hoff with his eczematous, slimy skin like a decaying corpse.

And I thought: Of course that's why she doesn't want me to get undressed, of course that's why she keeps me at arm's length and wards off my approaches and even my glances with her hands. Why is she really lying here like a skinny white nude by Giacometti?

A kindly reproof on her part: I have never felt a physical aversion to you, let alone still feel one. I just remember the picture that was on my retina at the time and really hardly anything of yourself. And even that picture has some parts of it missing.

Two lovers, both afraid of being found perhaps ugly, unattractive, repulsive in the other's eyes?

That I loved Daphne was beyond any doubt. Whether she too had ever loved me, as she had told me innumerable times, I do not know to this day, do not know to this moment as I write the word "not".

That – as I came to think afterwards – the whole story was only played out in my head like a phantasmagorical opera, a chimera of imaginary illusions, hopes, yearnings, is impossible, because there are reliable *facts* of which tangible as well as intangible artefacts have been preserved, the tangible ones fit for display in a museum showcase. And there is clear evidence of them. Photographs!

What may well have been pure fantasy is that the diva should, in turn, have entertained genuine feelings of love for me. But even if this were indeed no more than a pathetic fantasy, I owe it some, not too many, experiences that sometimes, not too often, have granted me illusions from which I have drawn strength of mind. Restored my faith at least in the possibility that something like *happiness* existed, and that, perhaps thanks to Daphne, a few crumbs of it might fall to me. This is one of those intangible artefacts.

That category also embraces:

My afterimage of the naked Daphne on that hotel bed. She would not allow me to remove her hands, with which she continued to cover herself, from her body, so that I could look at her with adoring lover's eyes. Venus Kallipygos in the archaeological museum in Naples. See her and die.

Immediately after I placed her hands next to her, on either side of her bony, protruding pelvis, she made them flutter up again to spread them like butterfly wings over her sex, which sacred shrine I had of course seen a long time ago. My image of it had little to do with reality. The line between the two white shores was not drawn with a deep-black pencil but with a pale pink one, its path not straight, not taut, but slightly curved - the artist's hand must have trembled with reverence. The ravine of milk and honey stood out with great clarity: not a wisp of hair shrouded it from view. Not that it had been removed with scissors, a razor or depilatory cream: like classical female nudes, sculpted or painted on canvas, she had no pubic hair, apart from some stray pale fluff where the stomach met the mount of Venus.

Never before had I seen a naturally hairless female sex, except just now in my imagination, when I made up the story of the flat girl with no body hair. Or had I at that moment caught a brief glimpse of her singularity out of the corner of my eye?

With gentle insistence, I tried to take her hands away from it, but she would not allow me to. I was not permitted to see what she had granted me in her half sleep while her professor husband strayed from north with his flagging compass needle. It was *me*, mark you, whom she had admitted and not the secret steady stand-by for her husband, the retired singing maestro with the double n. Might this Papageno on crutches still be successful with her and if not, was that why she kept me in mind as a possible reserve?

I only want to look at you, I said, although I already held the rose in my hand ready to stroke her miraculous spot.

Maybe another day, she repeated, there's no time now. You must go home, we mustn't make Paula suspicious. Come on, we've got to control ourselves, Nico trusts me.

Cynically I thought: Why?

She's mad, she's quite mad, and she's trying to drive me mad as well.

She said some more things, much as I kept thinking some more things, the rose against my nose – the sweet scent of the flower was drowned by her intoxicating perfume, but I could not make out what she was saying:

Aeroplanes tore overhead again, in the opposite direction now, out to sea, and with snarls that were more high-pitched.

A quarter of an hour later, on the way back home, I would hear them again and see them: surrounded by flooded meadowland, where the water splashed and foamed, a housing estate was ablaze, beyond the reach of the fire brigade. Aeroplane after aeroplane came down out of the black sky, against which flags of orange were strung out, poured thousands of gallons of water over the burning houses, rose up again and turned back towards the sea. Water bombing of a flooded plain. Fish falling out of the sky.

Through the roar of the aeroplanes the church clock began to reverberate nearby. The hours struck like time signatures in a hostile buzzing of insects intensified a billion times: twelve bangs.

Daphne's mouth no longer moved; the noise had convulsed her face into a mask of pain, but it relaxed again and lit up when, coinciding precisely with the last stroke of the clock, the telephone started to ring. She instantly sat up, supporting herself on her elbow so that I was granted an unobstructed full frontal view of her nakedness while, eyes darting to and fro, she tried to guess what the telephone might bring.

The instrument stood beside the sofa in front of a small plastic stand with printed information about local places of interest and events; a notepad and a ballpoint pen lay next to it. I couldn't think of a single place of interest in this windswept desert of a seaside resort.

With unaffected grace she swayed over the sea of blue as if alone in the room, oblivious of my glances. As she made for the ringing instrument, I could see her narrow back and buttocks – a small pink wart like a Braille letter on her lower back, right above the vague elastic impression left by her slip – at the same time as the mirror over the sofa revealed the front of her body. After she had picked up the receiver – Mrs Uitwyck, she said formally – the picture changed: she turned towards the room and exposed her back in the framed mirror.

I had sat down on the foot of the bed, the rose dangling upside down between my shoes. I dared not be as uninhibited as she – although I was fully dressed, she was bound to see my erection as soon as I stood up and for one reason or another I was diffident about that; I was even diffident about the thick warm saliva that had collected in my mouth and which I could not swallow without obvious effort.

Daphne lowered herself onto the blue sofa, sinking into the cushions as into waves of wool, the receiver hidden in her hair from which, surprised, she had first removed the chocolate. Not in the least embarrassed, she drew up one knee, placed her foot on the seat, heel against thigh and began to massage between her toes with her free hand. For a moment I thought I had seen her before in that pose, which was of course impossible – besides, I would have remembered the details more keenly.

Her slightly parted labia with the watermelon-coloured view inside. The faint web of scar tissue on the insides of her thighs.

With cool politeness, as if she were talking to a familiar business contact and not to Nico, snatches of whose academic voice I could clearly hear floating through the room, she said:

Oh, hi, it's you. You remembered! How sweet of you. No, I was in bed already. Have to be fit for tomorrow. Nothing's going on here. The hotel's OK, view of the beach and the sea, very noisy. Bucketing down with thunder and lightning? Here, too, but it's over now, the balcony doors are open, there's a nice little breeze blowing through my nightdress. At Jelmer and Paula's until about ten o'clock. It was fun, Paula cooked a lovely meal. They both say hello. I took a taxi back to the hotel. A great big bunch of flowers in my room. From that choral society here. First off, I rang Jelmer and Paula, no reply, a bit strange, they must have gone to bed already and didn't hear the phone, or else they let it ring. Tomorrow morning I'm going for a walk on the beach with Jelmer, I've agreed. Another nasty article about you in a journal? How mean they are! Keep your cool, rise above it, don't give in to your feelings of victimization, no one can do anything to you. I'll be back home the day after tomorrow, but I'll be doing Hugo Wolf in Voorhaven that night. That's a ship hooting. Give Arne a great big kiss from me. Bye-bye. Yes. Yes. Yes. Bye. Me too.

Just as she had told me once upon a time: If you have to lie, stick to the verifiable truth as much as you can. Nico had no need to feel alarmed, his peace of mind had again been gently cosseted, I wasn't with his legally wedded other half in her hotel room and what objection could there possibly be to an innocent walk on the beach among hundreds of other walkers in broad daylight? He could safely go on devoting himself to the identification of the fossilized organs of *Scipionyx samniticus*, a hundred and ten million years old.

After her exchange, as if it had been not with her husband but with the sound of rustling paper, she briefly looked up at me. She changed her position, her foot back on the floor, thighs pressed together, as if she suddenly realised what she had been doing. Now you see it, now you don't. With the flicker of a smile whose air of surprise I did not believe.

Was she a riddle or a bundle of whimsical contradictions? A tease? Have I really seen and experienced what I have put down on paper?

Elbows on her knees, small breasts again under her hands and covered in turn by her hair, of which I could only catch the gleam, she said: Sorry. That was Nico.

Her “sorry” referred to her having found the telephone more important than what we had been doing on the bed, and certainly not to the so innocently revealed view of her holy of holies, I thought. “Innocent” I had better cross out. That was the last thing she was.

He rang to congratulate me, she said. It’s been my birthday for the past few minutes.

I slipped down from the bed onto my knees, the stem of the rose between my teeth, and crawled towards her. That way my erection remained concealed. With a deep bow, I placed the flower on her feet, after which she allowed me to kiss her mouth and even gums, as she licked a little drop of blood, caused by a thorn, from my lower lip. Beyond that she would not let me do anything. She did not want me to try and part her knees to manoeuvre myself between them, or to try to move her hand away and press her down by the shoulders caressingly, with gentle force, so that she lay stretched out invitingly on the sofa, even while I could taste blood with the savour of iron. In the meantime I congratulated and complimented Nico’s wife in whispered verse, Shakespeare, d’Annunzio, Achterberg. Sitting on my heels on the deep-pile carpet, never ceasing to gauge her fixed, glazed smile, the rose back in my hand, touching her with it, arranging it, stripped of its thorny stem, in her hair by her mother-of-pearl ear. Her perfume really reeked on closer acquaintance, certainly in combination with champagne and mingled with salt air. I noticed she must be cold: her white nakedness was covered with gooseflesh, as if she’d been speckled pale blue with a very fine brush.

Why hadn’t she told me it was going to be her birthday? I asked. Then I could have done something to celebrate it more lavishly, lots of presents, naturally, and –

Although I said this, I had no idea of what I would have come up with in the way of celebration and presents. I felt I was making a fool of myself and imagined the ex-pupil of William the Silent College, at present a room service waiter, standing bent like a set square on the other side of the door, spying on us through the keyhole. That’s how rumours are born. And besides, I was beginning to feel even more tired, getting gradually fed up with the diva’s yo-yoing around.

I should have left it at that – as I came to realise afterwards more than once. I could see my thoughts writ large in thirty-two point letters. Mainly I was thinking: I'm only imagining that I am in love. With an errant wife. And I don't even know why I should *want* to imagine that. Be bold, get up, walk away from this beguiling mixed-up dream, forget her for good.

That's what I should have done.

Now I know that I shall never forget her.

With a fleeting caress she touched my cheek and answered: Tomorrow, darling. Soon, that is. Will you be coming to have breakfast with me? Afterwards we'll still have a whole morning and a big part of the afternoon. If you don't go back home now, Paula will start to think, and we don't want that to happen, do we?

I must have nodded. Wherever I looked, the sea of blue imposed itself on me. That's how I remember the heavy curtains, billowing out in the stealthy night wind like big bellies. Blue curtains, blue bellies. The washed-up naked corpse of a singing mermaid touched with deathly blue, gnawed to the bone by fishes and other water creatures. Scars between her thighs.

I stood up like a boy sent out of class for no good reason. Confused, humiliated, indignant, powerless, angry. Why, Sir? I don't wish to discuss it with you, Van Hoff, I'm sick and tired of you, that's reason enough.

Paula, what would she think of all this? Don't touch me, don't ever touch me again, are you still taking your pills?

As a teacher, too, I was later sent out of class and dismissed from school, even though I could tell exciting stories. Never suspected that those indifferent sweaty adolescents thought that.

Just as I had slipped into the bathroom to have a pee, which, in this context, lends itself to a Freudian interpretation by anyone inclined that way, I heard the telephone ring again. The sound of Daphne's voice carrying across the room as if she were suddenly the young and carefree conservatoire student of former years. Darling! My little elephant! Where are you ringing from? Really? You're here? Where, here? I thought you were in Munich. What a lovely surprise! Grete and the children? Thank you. Thank you so much. Of course, *danke, danke*, they are scented with your love, a beautiful, beautiful bouquet, so thoughtful of you. Next to my bed....

All this punctuated by my splashes in the lavatory bowl, inside which the management had affixed an artificial fly to provide male clients with something to aim at, and then, after I had flushed the pan, rendered inaudible by the cascade of water, as blue as the bathroom urn, the washbasin, the sarcophagus of a bath, the towels, the walls, the floor, the contents of my head. My little elephant, she had called that skeleton in a zimmer frame, that decayed Duke of Mantua in a wheelchair. Needless to say, she had been expecting him to ring all along, which explained why she had offered herself to me as nothing more than an *amuse-gueule*, a snack, so as to be taken by surprise by Johann's telephone call while she was ostensibly involved with me.

Soap opera. The way she had installed herself in that yards-wide bed. Supported by a bastion of pillows, shoulders bare, the sheet stretched over the small mounds of her breasts, so that they could be seen but remained camouflaged. The silver tray, the silver champagne ice bucket, the topped-up glass in which the hissing foam had subsided into the liquid. While she sat there radiantly, sipping, laughing, listening, cooing like a dove, small marks on her neck. The spoiled mistress of an immeasurably rich oil baron who had presented her with a swimming pool full of jewels while she was carrying on with her Croesus's corrupt, unshaven chauffeur. Candlelight, silk, the sparkle of a necklace, with a non-stop invisible wedding-confectionery ensemble nearby to provide a harmonious atmosphere. Another beautiful sight: every few seconds the light lancing through this tableau, across the rose in her hair.

I waved to her and blew her a kiss. She waved back and blew me a kiss as well. Pressing the receiver into the bedclothes, she whispered: Nine o'clock. Breakfast together. OK? No, poodlekins, what gave you that idea, she resumed her conversation with the maestro, who was apparently "here". Somewhere here in the vicinity or did "here" mean that he was in the country? I don't know what you heard. Of course I'm alone....

A long white corridor with doors, crossed by an identical white corridor, identical doors. In my absent-minded state I could not find the lift, nor any stairs anywhere.