

Darkly scintillating romance



Oek de Jong Hokwerda's Child

IN THE EIGHTIES, Oek de Jong's debut, *Opwaaierende zomerjurken* (*Waving Summer Dresses*), became a genuine cult book for a whole generation of students. It was followed by the beautiful 'Roman' novel *Cirkel in het gras* (*Circle in the Grass*), after which silence reigned. The announced publication of De Jong's third novel, *Hokwerda's kind*, mesmerised the whole literary

world in the Netherlands. And rightly so: he has issued a brilliant psychological novel that, at one stroke, has placed him among the foremost Dutch authors.

In *Hokwerda's kind*, the writer tells the story of a determined young woman, Lin Hokwerda, who loses herself in love. It is narrated with a broad vision yet with an extraordinary eye for detail. The novel opens with an oppressive scene: as a young girl, Lin Hokwerda is repeatedly thrown into the river by her father, who holds her by one arm and one leg and hurls her into the water that runs behind their house in the Friesian countryside. Every time after the rough splash into the water, she swims back to her father. Again and again she is flung back – until she almost drowns.

The shadow of this scene hangs above the entire book. With her mother and sister, Lin flees her 'untrustworthy' father at a young age. In her twenties, after a successful but prematurely broken sport career, she meets the man of her dreams. But the pattern of their love resembles that of the opening scene: Lin is consistently cast away by Henri but always comes back. When she meets Jelmer, a mild-mannered lawyer, and again falls in love, it appears, for a moment, that she can eradicate her fatal man from her life. However, she cannot quieten her restlessness and seeks out Henri once more. They explore the boundaries of responsibility, and have an affair. She herself turns out to be untrustworthy, just like her father.

In *Hokwerda's kind*, De Jong allows his characters to reach the peaks of love in sensual, erotic scenes, banishing all threats for a moment. But, with great stylistic force, De Jong eventually carries Lin and Henri to the 'outer darkness', to the inevitable doom.

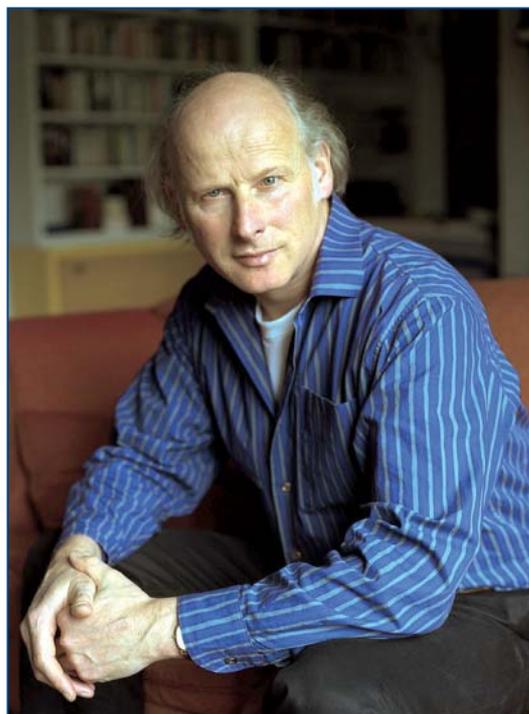


photo Cuny Janssen

Oek de Jong (born 1952) made his debut with a collection of short stories, *De hemelvaart van Massimo* (*Massimo's Ascension*, 1976), for which he was given the Reina Prinsen Geerligs award. He enjoyed his real breakthrough in 1979 with the novel *Opwaaierende zomerjurken*, an enormous success. His second novel *Cirkel in het gras* was extremely well received by both the literary critics and the reading public. It remained disturbingly quiet after the success of these two novels. De Jong made a comeback in 1993 with *De inktvis* (*The Octopus*) and published a collection of essays *Een man die in de toekomst springt* (*A Man Leaping Into the Future*) in 1997.

The new masterly novel terminates all speculation about the continuance of De Jong's authorship. He has returned from the unknown, with a romance that possesses a dark scintillation, in which the boundary between love and hate is blurred and is constantly transgressed.

TROUW



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OTHER TITLES IN TRANSLATION

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Ein Kreis im Gras (*Cirkel in het gras*). München; Zürich: Piper, 2000. Also in Swedish (Norstedts, 1987), in Romanian (Editura Univers, 1991), in Danish (Gyldendal, 1988), in Norwegian (Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1988) and in Finnish (Tammi, 1988).

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An interview with Oek de Jong

A resolute leap into the world

By Erwin Mortier

(4 December 2002, De Morgen)

translated by Roz Vatter-Buck

After more than fifteen years Oek de Jong has made his comeback to literature with the fist-sized novel *Hokwerda's kind* (Hokwerda's Child).

In the meantime though, De Jong has been far from silent; he has been publishing essays on a range of subjects from Gorter, Caspar David Friedrich and Ida Gerhardt, to the essence of mysticism and the life force of the novel. In these De Jong looks back indirectly to his first years as a writer and draws a number of implicit conclusions which, in some sense, presage *Hokwerda's kind*. This novel is probably also an interim evaluation. The writer claims that he is looking forward already to writing the next novel, which will, no doubt, build on its predecessor.

It must have been about four years ago when De Jong slipped into a telephone conversation that he was working on a novel from which he would 'emerge both changed and unchanged.' The phrase remained with me, not only because it seems to apply to this latest book, but also because it is characteristic of the conscientiousness with which De Jong approaches his art, and his gradual construction of a body of work consisting of literature and essays, all superficially different in style and subject yet showing a continuing evolution at a deeper level. It first became obvious that Oek de Jong was not averse to radical changes in direction in his writing when his collection of novellas, *De inktvis* (The Octopus) was published to great commotion, in 1987. Critics had already acclaimed his debut novel, *Opwaaiende zomerjurken* (Billowing Summer Frocks), which could be called a well-constructed 'development' novel in which deliberations about the organisational power of writing and story telling play an important role. This was followed in 1985 by *Cirkel in het gras* (Circle in the Grass), about the doomed relationship between a woman Dutch journalist and an Italian poet, in which various characters provide a multi-faceted perspective of the human condition and the spirit of the eighties. The critics were struck by the rare combination of craftsmanship, and the ability to weave intellectual matters into the story and psyche of the characters. This may be the reason for the confusion when the two novellas in *De Inktvis* appeared to feature not very bright protagonists – an introvert, laconic boy, and a Sicilian fisherman, poor in more ways than one. Both characters experience

an existential revelation which transforms their lives – the boy starts to talk, the fisherman withdraws to a monastery where he finds the peace of mind he lacked.

The critics seemed to think that this reeked of parables or fables, the more so because the catharsis for both characters was brought about by an animal. Today, the uproar is of sociological curiosity. It had to do with a society only just managing to escape the yoke of ministers, and therefore reacting violently to anything that seemed at all religious. And yet De Jong has always stressed that his interest in religious culture has nothing to do with a knee-jerk desire to see it restored.

‘The book was no more than an exercise,’ he says again, ‘It wasn’t important for this novel. I wanted to know what religion is, rather than react to superficial matters like dodgy priests or hypocritical ministers. I was interested in the images, the symbols, the texts, the mystique. Writing those stories was a way of attaining life. I think that because of my background and childhood, – always important in shaping your character – I was imprisoned inside myself for a long time. That’s largely the basis, the main theme, of my work. In it, you constantly encounter characters who are imprisoned in themselves, who are isolated. They don’t dare take that step into life, yet they look for ways to do so.’

Hokwerda’s kind can, in this respect, be seen as a leap into this world, a concrete world which is shown in all its sharpness and sensuality through Lin, the female protagonist in whom important characters traits from De Jong’s previous novels appear to converge. Like the characters in *De Inktvis*, Lin isn’t prone to refer to Kant’s aesthetics or Augustinus’ concept of original sin, yet evil does play a role. Lin has more in common with the intellectually preoccupied characters in *Opwaaiende zomerjurken* or *Cirkel in het gras* than a superficial reading suggests. She, too, recognises the chasm between herself and the world, a chasm she would like to bridge, while lacking the intellectual construction that supported, for instance, the character Edo Mesch in *Opwaaiende zomerjurken*, a system which is ‘blindingly clear, simple, elegant and symmetrical. How wonderful it would be to just interact with others while that system shining quietly in his head.’

Lin looks elsewhere for the synthesis of her inner and outer world. ‘She is essentially an uprooted child,’ the writer says. ‘Her parents’ marriage is on the rocks, the nest she grew up in has been torn apart. She is a person without family. It’s typical of these times. The age-old idea of living in a clan because it makes you stronger in this cruel world has been done away with. Right from

the start Lin wants to experience the present, to experience something immediate. This recurs throughout the novel. I think it has to do with her isolation. Like other characters in my work, she's blocking herself, she doesn't have easy or fluid relationships. I think that, without realising it, Lin's is looking for experiences that shock, both physically and intellectually, because these shocks open her up, free her from her prison.'

The start of the book is shocking, while being cleverly measured and restrained at the same time. The child Lin – and the reader with her – is tossed over the reeds into the waters of a Frisian lake by her father, Hokwerda. The scene's excellent for its subtle interchange of intimacy and menace, tenderness and aggression, safety and fear, and – particularly – because every splash ripples through the rest of the text, in which ecstasy and stability vie with each other. After her father's marriage breaks down and she grows up with her mother in Amsterdam, Lin's complex relationship with her father is echoed in her relationships with two completely different men. Henri, a little older than the 24 year-old Lin and a welder on an oilrig, resembles Lin's father – who enjoyed throwing his daughter through the air – in the passionate and violent way in which he makes love to her and uses her. Jelmer, on the other hand, is a man of culture and civilisation for whom Lin leaves Henri, only to be unfaithful to him later on. Jelmer reflects the caring side of her father.

Hokwerda's child's life appears to be based on the classic gulf between reason and emotion, the shuttling between desires. However De Jong says this is only partly true. 'These two men represent two poles, but not in a simple black and white way. Henri is physical, sensual, but so is Jelmer, who really enjoys his sexual relationship with Lin. He represents gentleness, civilisation. He is from a good family, and has a seventeenth-century Spanish still-life on his wall, his family, his history, is very important to Lin. Sexual passion, however, is stronger between Lin and Henri. With him she transcends a boundary, entering a world she does not know, one that you can be afraid of, detest even and yet be attracted to.

'I think, in her own way, Lin has a philosophical mind. She wants to learn, she wants insight. That's inevitable for me as a novelist too. It's a powerful driving force in my personal life – I want to understand things. For a long time I thought I could acquire this insight intellectually, philosophically. That was roughly between the ages of twenty and thirty-five.'

'At that age, intellectual reasoning does provide insight, but it has limits, which is what you see in this book. This isn't an anti-intellectual book, but the

intellectual is very much in the background. Henri, Jelmer and Lin all look for primary experiences – not through their intellect, but through their bodies.’

The characters do indeed spend much of their time either in bed or on other suitable surfaces, which has prompted some critics, describing the love-making scenes in *Hokwerda's kind*, to take the easy way out calling them ‘smoky’ and ‘steamy’. Remarkably, however, sexuality sharpens the characters’ experience of the world, intensifying it through ecstasy, which may be why Lin starts cheating on her beloved Jelmer with her former lover Henri. She’s attracted to him because she recognises something in Henri – who, like her, has no family – that Jelmer cannot offer. If it didn’t sound so trite, one might call this hyper-functional nudity. This novel’s strength, however, lies perhaps in the mercurial agility and ambiguity of the characters’ motives and emotions, which are possibly more agile than their desiring and desired bodies. Due to the jealousy caused by Lin’s unfaithfulness, Jelmer also appears capable of moments of revelation, while Henri’s often rude manner with women increasingly reveals a robust tenderness. Lin eventually has to admit that strong passions are not necessarily authentic or immediately recognisable. She acknowledges her own deceitfulness, subtly evading the truth when, talking about her renewed relationship with Henri.

‘Lin tends to lie,’ the writer says, ‘but not in any terrible sense. She talks about her infidelity, but leaves out the one significant detail. Is that lying? It’s more about unconscious, gradual evil.’ *Hokwerda's kind* is particularly about that slow accumulation of darkness which suddenly intrudes on the banality of everyday life, as when Lin commits the ultimate evil by killing Henri. This dramatic climax is only indirectly presented to us, we do not witness it. Again, what is striking is that Lin’s crime has no simple explanation. It is as if she also wants to acquire forbidden knowledge about death, an experience as ecstatic as sexual desire but more terrible in its consequences. It is a darkness which, with hindsight, is concealed in the first pages of the novel when the very young Lin is both repelled and attracted by the water and soft mud of the Frisian lake.

In the rest of De Jong’s work, death, water and abandon are often closely linked. It is a fascination shared by the writer. ‘Of the four elements, I’m closest to water. I was in Vlissingen a few days ago. You can see the Westerschelde estuary from there, and I had that odd sensation I often have when I go sailing. Looking out over the Schelde towards the North Sea, I thought of stormy days when the water crashes onto the promenade in waves metres high. I could also imagine, however, joining a lifeboat in the bad weather. I reckon drowning would be the best way to die. I’ve often sailed on

the Oosterschelde, even in stormy weather. I was frightened, knowing what might happen, and I'm scared when I leave the harbour in bad weather, yet I do it. I don't have that feeling with air, I can't imagine getting a pilot's licence and taking to the skies, I don't feel at home in the sky. Perhaps that's typically Dutch (laughs). It's an essential part of me, water, it has always fascinated me. If you read major psychologists like Jung or Freud, you find they regard water as a symbol, a symbol of the unconscious, for instance, but I'd rather not go into that. I prefer to just let it splash in my work.

Although *Hokwerda's kind* is characterised by subtle diversity both in images and in the characters' moods and motives, it is straightforward compared to De Jong's earlier work. It lacks capricious diversions, parallel stories and long meditations. De Jong appears to distance himself from his earlier obsessions as a writer who was most interested in tradition, perhaps sometimes too strongly influenced by it. This distancing first became apparent in the essay *Een klievende roman* (A Cutting Novel), in which he was sceptical about the often-repeated claim that the novel is dead.

The writer confirms that he does not think that the novel is dead. 'It has died, revived and died again for a decade. I see myself as a realist, a descendant of such great nineteenth-century writers as Stendhal and Tolstoy. In my own way, of course. My current thoughts on the novel are that it is a form that can be used in any era to contemplate something new. It's an instrument. You can also experiment with it, certainly. You can use it ironically to great effect, you can tell the story backwards, etcetera. But all this has been done. I think that the modernist phase has given us a few very valuable techniques. Thanks to Modernism, a *monologue intérieur* can be several pages long, so I use these techniques. I feel quite *senang*, to use an Indonesian word, in that realist tradition, because you can do different things in it.'

'I also think that it was legitimate for our predecessors to question existing traditions. That began at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, and reflected a different experience of reality. The experience of chaos and fragmentation was a new phenomenon in the European awareness, and needed to be reflected by literary techniques, by Romanticism, which is what happened. At some point I worked out that what was shocking then, the fragmentation of things, may not be so shocking now. We've learnt to deal with it. Our brain has taught us to move through a metropolis without bumping into anything. Amsterdam traffic is anarchy when you're on a bicycle, but your brain registers everything, all those speeds and people moving towards you. I think that people have also learned mentally to live with this fragmentation. We have adapted, just as animals adapt to their environment. In other words, literature that describes

reality as fragmentation is completely outmoded. I don't find those books interesting any more . Modernism, the *nouveau roman* and Postmodernism are simply large branches on the tree of the European novel. I enjoy the movements, they produced great books, but I think they are outmoded because our conscience has changed.'

'In our time, people still tend to undermine things and turn them upside down. You could ask: what remains? I think a novelist should always attempt to create unity. You can't escape it, that's the function of the story. Perhaps that's why the novel flourishes.'

Sample translation from

Hokwerda's Child by Oek de Jong
(Amsterdam: Augustus, 2003)

Translated by Steve Leinbach

(p.395-420)

IN THE REEDS

“Are you tired?”

“No, just queasy.”

“We’re nearly there now.”

They had found the village, and at the edge of the village the farm, and there was the rowing boat. Henri had spoken to the farmer, who had given him the outboard motor and can of petrol. He had put the motor on the boat and stowed another five jerry cans filled with drinking water in the front with the bags. Now he could leave. He stretched out, the evening sun against his face. Behind him he heard the sound of the farmer’s wooden clogs receding, across the farmyard, then into the empty stables.

Lin sat on the rowing bench in the shadow of the reeds, her hands between her thighs. He smiled at her.

“Another half hour.”

Outside the village the waterway widened, and presently it opened up into a lake. The wind had almost dropped; the last sailing boats were on their way home. Henri took out the photocopy of a nautical map and, with his free hand,

smoothed it over his knee. He had to sail along the shore of the lake for about twenty minutes; then to his right there would be a smaller stretch of water, which he had to sail diagonally across to get to a rusty pumping station, where he would find a narrow canal that led to the next pond, and somewhere around there would be Kalle's houseboat.

He had built six luxury apartments for Kalle in an historic building in the centre of town; they had even put a swimming pool in the basement, but fortunately he'd had nothing to do with that. Kalle was rich, so rich that he now just wanted to do "nice things" with his money. Kalle was jovial. Somewhere Kalle had a houseboat he rarely used. Kalle lent them his boat.

Henri opened the throttle all the way, so as to get to the houseboat as fast as possible and start his weekend, to crack open a beer and do a little fishing. He'd had a rough week. He smiled again at Lin, and over the noise of the motor he called out, "I'm looking forward to this!"

She stayed sitting there with her hands between her thighs, her head tense between her raised shoulders. She looked at the v-shaped stern wave that fanned out wide behind them; she looked at the ducks being lifted up in the wake, at a floating clump of reeds as it bobbed about wildly for a instant. She felt disinclined to bend over the map, and get involved in navigating, which surprised her. But that's how it was. Let him do it. She'd rather look at the clump of reeds being lifted in their wake and remember the smell of rotting roots, and how she would stick her hand among those roots as she swam along the banks of the Ee and stopped to look into the reeds, treading water, afraid of touching something underwater with her feet, a broken-off tree branch, the stalk of a reed. She remembered how on summer evenings she would look at flowers in the reeds, at insects, how she would slide her hand between the hairy roots and breathe in the warm smell of decay given off by the reeds.

After exactly twenty minutes by Henri's reckoning, a new and smaller pond appeared to his right. So Kalle drove with the throttle wide open too. Henri crossed the water diagonally, heading for the point where he saw something

emerge from behind the tufts of reeds, iron railings and a paddle wheel. That must be the rusty pumping station. As he turned into the narrow canal, he slowed down. There were tall reeds on either side. Alders grew over the water, casting their shadows. Every so often an opening appeared in the fringe of reeds; across these openings lay barbed wire or a bar, and behind them lay a pond, packed with water lilies. The thick round leaves grew over each other, pushing each other up and the lilies with them.

“It’s going to be romantic,” said Henri, automatically lowering his voice.

“Yes.”

Lin leaned over to one side to touch the water with her hand. It was soft, just like the water of the Ee. But the colour was different here; it was almost black. She had never seen so many water lilies, hundreds of them on every pond. Now that it was evening, the white flowers were illuminated against the background of the dark green leaves. A moorhen walked across them, stepping from leaf to leaf.

“Jesus, how romantic can you get?”

“Do you want a beer before we get there?”

“We’re nearly there.”

Scattered among the reeds were cabin cruisers. The evening meal had already been eaten; on every ship a man sat staring at his float; his wife was in the cabin cleaning or doing the dishes, or she was already installed in front of the television. Coffee was also being drunk. These motor yachts of the elderly at an appropriate distance from one another lay in the reeds and under the trees. Lin nodded and waved at the men fishing. She thought about getting older. She was surprised to find herself thinking about it, and it surprised her even more that she didn’t despise these boring people on their boring yachts.

Henri respected the floats, but the serenity of that long, winding canal made him peevish. As soon as the waterway widened, he opened up the throttle again.

Kalle’s houseboat lay at a small peninsula, with a view of the pond, as promised, screened at the back by reeds and bushes. Some ducks flew away when Henri

drove the boat smack onto the shore, snapping and flattening the reeds under the bow. The ground felt springy under Lin's feet as they walked to the houseboat. It was warmer on the peninsula than on the water: the warmth was trapped by the reeds and the bushes. She smelled the odour of rotting plants. Mosquitoes, as had been predicted. Under the overhanging roof of the houseboat she walked face first into a network of rustling spider webs.

“Here!”

Henri threw her the keys. They came flying towards her in an arc through the evening sky, here, at a spot they had never been to, as she wiped a spider web from her face and Henri stood in the reeds, bent over a boat, something she had never seen him do, and the keys jingled softly as they flew towards her; an orange tag was attached to them, and plop, she enclosed them in her hand.

The boat smelt musty, which made her nausea worse. In the front hall a torrent of jackets, raincoats and caps on the hat stand, shoes and boots underneath it, flippers, paddles, balls, boxes and plastic bags filled with empty bottles. A bedroom with bunk beds on either side and the traces of Kalle's children everywhere – “grown up and depressed now”, as he had said with a laugh. Then a bedroom with a double bed, a kitchenette with a window that looked out onto the reeds of the peninsula, a spacious living room with windows facing the water and finally a deck. She stood on the deck while Henri threw open the windows. With the air came the mosquitoes. But there was a mosquito net, she had seen.

“Is there a broom?” she called out. “I'll brush the deck.”

In no time she stood there in bare feet, trousers rolled up, scrubbing the duck shit, algae and other evidence of a year's absence off the planks, dipping her broom in the water again and again. As usual, she became totally absorbed in cleaning and worked manically. Meanwhile Henri crouched on a section that had already been cleaned and hung the five jerry cans and bottles of beer in the water from pieces of twine. He found folding chairs, a folding table and a parasol and set them down when she was almost finished and was throwing bucketfuls of water over the boards. In this way they took possession of the deck together.

Then came the cabin. Lin made the bed and unpacked the groceries. Henri was given the job of putting in the screens, that she had discovered, and he carried the furniture she felt was unnecessary out of the living room into the children's bedroom.

“Okay,” he said, “and now a good place for Alex.”

He took a framed photograph of Alex Wüstge out of his bag and wandered round the room with it. It was a year ago that Alex had drowned himself in the IJ. Since then Henri thought about him almost every day: first with anger and dismay, with bouts of guilt and pity; after that he searched for an explanation, and when he didn't find one, once he ran into that wall that blocks others' innermost selves from view, he had started to commemorate Alex. He had begun remembering all the experiences he and Alex had shared. Forgotten events floated back to the surface. He had talked to others about him; Alex's image had changed, and slowly but surely he had begun to love his friend. He had had a picture of him framed and took it with him whenever he went away. The memory of Alex now conjured up a warmth in him that he had seldom felt for him in life. Could you ever love the living as you loved the dead, freely, without conflict?

Henri gave the photo a place in front of a window at the waterside. Lin put a glass with flowers beside it, flowers she had picked, roots and all, in the reeds, and right next to it she laid her books. It was a good picture of Alex. For once he wasn't smiling, finally. He was looking at a dead bird, which he had slid onto a dustpan, and he was looking at it as if he were alone, as if he had forgotten himself. It was a young starling he was looking at, black with white flecks, perfect, rigid, without visible flaws or injury, and even more beautiful than the word “starling” would lead one to expect.

In the twilight Henri went for a swim. The pond was empty, the birds were silent. In the air the last gold disappeared into the grey. He swam a good distance out. When he was scarcely visible anymore, she called to him, and he came back. She sat there, not moving, under the parasol.

“Come on in,” he said, and his voice resounded over the water. “It’ll do you good.”

After some urging she gave in. She did put on her swimsuit though, as if that could protect her in the dark water. As she lowered herself into the water from the ladder that hung off the side of the deck, she tried to clean the rungs with her hand: they were slippery with algae. In the water she got scared. She swam to Henri and clung to him, her arms around his neck, her legs around his waist.

Henri stood up and allowed himself to sink into the mud, letting his feet sink into the soft layer of dead plants, almost revelling in the sensation,. When the mud reached his knees he felt solid ground.

“Jesus, this is gross,” she said, gasping, “those gas bubbles running along my body.”

She squirmed away and swam back. Standing on the deck she saw Henri splash his face with handfuls of water; she watched him swim to the rowing boat and lift out the petrol can, afraid of theft even here. Shortly after she heard him walk round the houseboat, and all that time she was unable to take off her swimsuit, and dry herself. At least I scrubbed this deck, she thought, looking at the boards, and tomorrow I’ll clean the ladder in the water and then do the kitchen. She heard Henri fiddling with the water pump in the lavatory, which was not working. She knew how pleasant the noises of a working man could be to her ears. But each noise now sounded empty, out of reach; each noise told her she was alone.

She was ashamed of herself. What was she doing standing here while Henri slaved away? She imagined him on his knees, the floor around him littered with parts, and could not bear to see him. She looked across the pond, at a pair of ducks flying silently over the surface of the water. A yacht glided past, the cabin portholes illuminated, a women at the helm, two children hanging over the railing, and a man on the foredeck who tossed the anchor in the water with a flourish. A splash; the motor was turned off; voices were audible. Once the yacht was at anchor, she felt better.

“Light that lamp, would you?”

She hurried inside and lit the kerosene lamp in the kitchen.

Cross-legged, stark naked, Henri sat in the doorway of the lavatory, a tiny booth, barely big enough for an adult. She looked at his pubic hair, at his sex, which looked brownish, at his hands holding tools. In the bedroom she took off her swimsuit. Along its edges, something black clung to her body: miniscule bits of mud. She touched her belly with her fingertips.

From the edge of the bed she looked at Henri in the light of the kerosene lamp. He filled her with revulsion. Vile man, she thought, vile man. Somebody had to take those words out of her head. For weeks now she had heard terms of abuse whenever she looked at him.

“How’s it coming along, darling?”

“I could do with a beer.”

She walked outside, knelt down at the edge of the deck and took a bottle of beer from the water. Meanwhile she looked at the yacht, at the illuminated portholes. She caressed Henri’s shoulders as she put the bottle of beer down next to Henri, at the same time thinking the words she didn’t want to think, that someone had to take out of her head.

“I could stay here for weeks,” she said. “Clean and fix up the whole houseboat, mow the reeds by the landing place, make up for everything, and be alone with you, live simply, run wild.”

“This fucking thing!”

“What’s the matter?”

“When I’m done with this, I’m going to sit on the deck the rest of the evening and get pissed!”

While she put on clean clothes, she heard the handle of the pump in motion, being moved furiously back and forth to suck up the water. The sound got on her nerves. Vile man, vile man! She now heard those words to the rhythm of the pump. She began wildly shooing away mosquitoes from round her head.

On Saturday morning Lin woke up late. She looked around quietly, from under the mosquito net in childlike delight at the newness of it all, she looked through the kitchen and the living room to the deck, where the parasol fluttered in the wind, casting a slanted shadow. Little waves splashed against the houseboat; birds chirped in the reeds, as the wind blew through the stalks. For a moment she heard the flapping of sails: a boat was tacking near the tip of the peninsula.

Henri was making tea.

Lin walked through, in a T-shirt, with her hair down, her eyelids still swollen with sleep. In the living room she lowered the blinds in front of the windows, where the sun was already starting to blaze. She looked at Alex and the dead starling, at the yellowish water in the glass beside, at the roots of the flowers, and she put her hand on the book she would read later. Out on deck the wind glided past her bare legs; the boards under her feet were already warm. There was still a trace of morning chill in the air. She stood under the parasol. The glare from the water was so strong that she had to squint to see. The yacht was still there. She looked round eagerly, enjoying a few minutes without fear.

Henri did not come out.

When she went inside, there it was again: fear, the need to conceal her uneasiness, to brace herself, to be on guard. But she was so used to it that she hardly noticed it; it was no more than a slight shadow, something beginning to weigh down on her.

Henri was standing at the counter drinking tea. It wasn't like him to drink tea. But he wanted peace and therefore he started the day off with tea, just like her.

"How are you doing?"

"Great."

"So you're feeling better?"

"Yes, fortunately."

They stopped talking. Henri still didn't dare talk openly about her pregnancy. She preferred not to have to do it herself, as if it were better not to speak about it,

to keep it quiet. Henri gave her a cup of tea. He had opened the kitchen window. She looked at the reeds.

“It’s lovely,” she said, “that you can look right into the reeds here.” She sat down at the kitchen table and looked round. “I like the way they’ve arranged the kitchen.”

“Yeah, they did a good job.”

“And it’s a beautiful spot.”

“Kalle’s got a nose for good spots.”

Maybe we can buy this boat, she wanted to say. After all, Kalle’s not doing anything with it. His new wife has no interest in it; she hasn’t even been here. But she swallowed the words. Last night, after a long hesitation, she had finally brought up the subject of a new house. She wanted to trade her apartment and his for a house belonging to a couple who were splitting up. Henri hadn’t wanted to hear about it.

They stopped talking. The silence grew oppressive. Lin, as usual, was the first to yield.

“Are you still angry?” she asked quietly.

“We won’t discuss it this weekend.”

“Yes, I agree that’s best,” she said hastily.

Henri threw the rest of his tea into the sink.

A short time later she saw him dive off the deck. The water splashed up underneath his outstretched body; drops fell in front of her feet on the deck. He swam towards the yacht. Lin fetched the binoculars. On the afterdeck of the yacht the woman, in a sun hat, was reading; the man was doing something on the foredeck, and the two children, a boy and a girl, were playing with a rubber boat. Henri swam to the stern. He apparently said something to the woman, because she put her book down on her lap, looked at him, smiled, set her hat at a slightly jauntier angle and turned to watch him as he swam past her. Lin’s heart was pounding.

After returning, Henri sat on the edge of the deck, refreshed, his feet in the water, his eyes pointing in the direction of the yacht. Lin got a towel for him, but he didn't need it. Drops of water glistened on his torso. He was still panting. Possessively she stroked his hair for few moments.

It always happened when she saw him from behind, often at the very moment she was caressing him, like now. She would imagine splitting open the back of his head with an axe and seeing a wound, and blood running through his blond hair. Even as she was doing it, she didn't want to; it just came over her, and as it came over her she felt violent fear. But she was so used to it that she could stand behind him as the image forced itself upon her and stroke his hair as she looked at the wound.

They sat on the deck until about two. Lin was reading. Henri had a dry throat and drank a beer. He went in search of the petrol can, took another look at the repaired pump and fried some bacon and eggs. Lin smelled the fried bacon on the deck, and with tears in her eyes felt the weight lift. She resolved not to say anything more about a new house. Whatever happened, happened. His house was good enough.

When the midday heat began to get oppressive and they became listless, they ran into each other in the kitchen. Henri gave her such a look, a look that still turned her on after five years. He pulled her towards him. With her chin on his shoulder she caressed his warm back as she looked at the moving reeds. The wind whipped around the houseboat. Henri had put an arm around her waist. For a while they just stood there, pressed up against each other without saying anything. That always helped. She began to feel trust again. She always wanted to be as close to him as she was now; then nothing could happen, nothing could come between them.

While Henri pulled her towards the bed, she broke free.

"I'll be right back."

As she sat naked in the cramped lavatory, the door open, elbows on her knees, Henri took a picture of her. For a while now he had been taking pictures of their

life together. He did it with a small, silver-coloured camera that he had picked out from Alex Wüstge's estate. He took a picture of her as she sat there in the narrow booth, elbows on knees, looking up at him. He took another one and continued to look at her through the viewfinder. He felt the cool metal of the camera in his hands, against his cheek – the metal which still had Alex's fingerprints on it. At the same time he felt his sex, which hung there in its semi-erect state, heavy and languid; he enjoyed his randiness. A warm stream of air stroked his naked body as it blew past. He remembered Alex, as he had seen him for the last time, in the warehouse. I'm still here, he thought, triumphantly, and you're gone. It shocked him that he could think such a thing.

Lin sat there without moving, dreamily. You could hear a few last drops falling. Henri lowered the camera and his face hardened.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I'm thinking about Alex.”

“That we're here while he's gone.”

“Something like that.”

She was proud that she had guessed correctly. She was just starting to understand death, although she did not yet sense its presence, and her own life still seemed endless.

“See, it works,” she said. She had taken hold of the handle of the water pump and began pumping the water up. The pump made a slurping sound. Henri took another picture of her, while she pumped and looked at him, bashful and sweet. That's how she should always be, he thought. Because there were times when she seemed to look down on him and withdraw into herself.

When she woke up, Henri had disappeared. Next to her was a note: he had gone to the village to do some shopping and get a new can of petrol. She held the note in her sweaty hand and lay still on her back, legs slightly spread. The mosquito net enclosed her like a tent. Outside, the reeds were rustling. In the kitchen the

flies were buzzing. In the midday heat it seemed as if all the sounds that came from farther away had fallen silent.

She squatted above a basin of water and washed herself. She scraped a last little crust of bacon from the frying pan. Again she walked through the houseboat to look at things, already feeling at home. The houseboat belonged to others, but it was starting to become hers and Henri's. In the living room she tried out a chair and looked out at the deck for a while, at the shadows of the chairs and the parasol. Flies buzzed and tapped against the windows. She looked at Alex and thought about dying. Could her heart suddenly stop? Henri had once laid his head on her chest, listened to the beating of her heart and said, you can hear that it's still young and strong; it has a nice tight sound. She forgot death and looked down at her calves, at the light blond hairs that stood on end in the breeze. Was this the moment to wax her legs? She'd brought the stuff. She slouched listlessly in the chair and felt the strange upholstery beneath her.

She stood up. She peered at the yacht through the binoculars: a tarpaulin had been put up behind the cabin and underneath it sat the boy and the girl opposite each other, bent over, engrossed in a game. She did not see the father and the mother. She imagined they were sleeping in the cabin.

She lay under the mosquito net, her eyes open, listening to the sounds. The houseboat enveloped her, and inside it, the tent of the mosquito net did the same, while she herself enveloped a tiny embryo. It was still an "it," smaller than a bean. It still filled her with disbelief, even though the results of the test were irrefutable, even though her body's reactions were unmistakable. She couldn't comprehend that it was true, that it was going to happen to her too. Sometimes she wasn't even sure if she wanted it. But as soon as she pictured it bigger, recognizable, she did it, and it was impossible not to. She imagined a little Henri, a boy who looked like him, with the same strong legs, little Henri-legs, on which he scampered through the room with the fearlessness of his father. A little boy with a little ribcage, whom she would press up against her, a child who would

doze on her chest on a warm afternoon like this one, maybe even in this houseboat, next summer.

She thought about her mother. When her mother was as old as she was now, almost twenty-nine, she already had two children, the older one nine, the younger one six. She had got married when she was twenty. She swelled up while Hokwerda knocked down and remodelled the worker's houses on the Ee. Emma was a love child, it was said. Three years later she was conceived to save the marriage. In one of their ferocious rows her mother had blurted out that she had been made to save a marriage. From that moment she understood why her mother had never loved her. Her father had wanted her, her mother hadn't. That was why, from the very beginning, she had been her father's child and had always run to him for safety – though she could never trust him completely and always had to be on guard.

She listened to the reeds and remembered the reeds along the Ee. How small birds would sit among them chirping, invisible, early in the morning and near dusk. She remembered her surprise when she first saw a dragonfly: that thin, elongated little body, a metallic deep blue, the transparent wings – it looked like an insect from the tropics. One evening she had sunk down into those reeds, her dress ballooning out in the water. Her father had washed the mud off her legs with water from a bucket, while she had leaned back into his knees... In a few years she would be washing the legs of her own child like that, a boy with the same sort of ribcage and muscular arms, as he leaned impatiently against her knees... Were things all right between her and Henri? She didn't know. Could things ever be all right? Was it even possible? No longer being afraid of anything... Grampa Hokwerda had showed her the pump in the kitchen of his secluded cottage and let her taste the water he had been drinking all his life, water that tasted of iron, straight out of the ground, and later that day, or some other day, he had shown her his pear tree and his apple tree, in the garden where he raked the paths on Saturday afternoon, and he had picked gooseberries for her; she had never seen them before, gooseberries with their half-transparent peels,

covered in soft hairs. He was an eccentric and had been alone for a long time; his wife had died young; he hadn't found a new one, and his three sons were said to run wild, and he couldn't handle them. Her father had been the wildest. Grampa Hokwerda had that temper, which her father also had and which she had as well.

Suddenly afraid, she stood up. She took down the dusty mosquito net, washed it in a bucket of water and hung it up to dry. The sun had already completed a good deal of its descent. The afternoon was almost over. Henri had been away a long time. But she didn't care. She liked being alone for a few hours. She cleaned the front hall. She cleaned the kitchen and the toilet, lugging round buckets of water, the yellowish water in which her father had washed her muddy legs. Where was Grampa Hokwerda buried? Was that the next step: asking her father where his father was buried?

She found a sickle and walked outside with it, barefoot, to feel the grass. At the landing place she cut away the rampant growth of reeds and laid the chopped bundles on the marshy ground. Because of the fury with which she worked, almost as if she were trying to cut herself on the sharp reeds, she noticed her rising gloom. Eventually one of her fingers started to bleed. She brushed away the spider webs from under the overhang. Suddenly she was tired again. She hung the clean mosquito net, smelling of soap, over the bed and lay down, waiting for Henri, who must now be on his way back. She listened, ears pricked, to every boat that approached. She felt low.

Kalle came into her thoughts, the dinner they had had a few days ago at one of his restaurants in the centre of Amsterdam. She in her tight dress. Next to Kalle, a dashing man in his fifties in an expensive, and smart linen jacket, tanned by the Nice sun, where he owned a house, and on that gleaming, tanned head the stubble of his close-cropped hair. Clever Kalle, who now only did "nice things". Across from her his new wife, pregnant, a sight to behold. Suddenly she could no longer keep the news to herself and told them she was pregnant. Henri had promptly placed his hand on hers, smiling proudly and tenderly, as might be expected of a father-to-be. She realized now that she had confided her secret to

strangers out of ambition, in order to count, and not, as she had deluded herself, because she had seen Kalle as a father figure. Kalle had champagne brought out, to win her over, to win Henri over; that was how he did business, and he had casually offered them his houseboat, his “little boat”, which she was now diligently cleaning. With a spade she cleaved through Kalle’s oh so amiable face; the blood dripped over his gleaming skull, past his ears, his neck, over the shoulders of his jacket, and moaning, half-crying with fear she sat up under the mosquito net.

When she woke up, it was evening. She listened but knew already that Henri was not there. No footsteps or the rustling of a newspaper on the deck, no sounds from the kitchen of a meal being prepared or crackling sounds from the frying pan drowning out the soft music of a transistor radio. Even though she knew better, she walked to the landing place anyway, where she had laid the freshly cut reeds for *him* on the marshy ground; it was almost as if she had made an arrangement of them (the straighter and more beautiful the arrangement, the greater the chance he would come soon). But the rowing boat was not there.

Sitting on the deck she looked out over the water, binoculars beside her. The yacht that had still been at anchor yesterday evening had disappeared. She looked at the empty spot. She looked at the other side of the pond, at the jagged edge of the woods; somewhere around there must have been the buoy that marked the entrance to the canal. She looked at a crested grebe with its long neck and tuft as it glided through the smooth water, pushed it up around its chest and dived under. But she didn’t have the patience to wait for it to resurface, hundreds of metres away, greedily gulping down fish.

When evening began to fall, she called Tine.

The last few months she seemed to have found a bosom friend for the first time in her life: Tine. It was almost an infatuation. Tine worked for a film studio. They had known each other for over a year by phone; they regularly called each other about costumes. She loved Tine’s voice; it revived her. One day she had

been on a set during a film shoot; she felt a tap on her shoulder, and when she turned around and saw a slender and vivacious woman standing there, she knew: this was Tine. They had gone out. A few weeks ago she had taken a bath at Tine's house. Tine was the only one of her friends who knew she was pregnant. After she had blabbed her secret to Kalle and his new wife, she had rushed to tell Tine too.

As soon as she heard Tine's voice, the lake made a less desolate impression.

"Mainly I'm tired," she said. "I've slept half the day away."

She went into raptures over the houseboat and its location, their arrival yesterday evening, the trip. She frequently spoke in the first person plural, and was close to pretending that Henri was there too, or a short distance away – that would explain the silence – he was peering at a float that he almost couldn't see anymore, her Henri, her man, smelling of the cigars he smoked nowadays, blond hair in bristly tufts on his head, tangled after swimming. Lin felt the deception possess her; it was almost inescapable. When Tine asked about Henri, she said that he was fishing not far away and that she had been walking across the deck, wiggling her hips for hours to lure him back home.

After the conversation she remained outside, trying to resist the fear that was welling up inside her. Henri was on his way. At this moment he was walking from his car to the rowing boat carrying the outboard motor. This afternoon the motor had conked out. He had loaded it into his car and gone off in search of a shop where he could get the thing repaired on a Saturday afternoon. He had had to drive some distance to find one; he had had to wait for hours. But why didn't he ring? He had left his telephone on the kitchen table, but he knew her number, didn't he? Or didn't he know it by heart?

She lit a hurricane lamp and put it on the kitchen table; she left the main room unlit so as to see better outside. She placed a second hurricane lamp on the deck as a beacon – it also enlarged her territory in the dark. She waited. Her eye fell on Henri's weekend bag. She took his clothes out and put them on a shelf, folded. She put her own clothes next to his. She put clean clothes on; she brushed her

hair and put it up; she went on cleaning and tidying, ever more meticulously – and everything now served to hasten, to compel, to beg for his return; every movement she made seemed to be connected to that. Meanwhile her uneasiness grew. Meanwhile she listened.

In the distance the sound of an outboard motor could be heard. She walked to the deck. It was a moonless night. She shivered in the warm air. After a little while she could make out a tremulous white light on the opposite shore, which dimmed every now and then. Some time later a rowing boat became visible and in it three figures, two on the rowing bench, their backs to her, and one at the motor. Had Henri brought people back with him? It was three young guys. Only when the boat was unmistakably heading towards the tip of the peninsula – the foaming wake was illuminated in the darkness – did she give up hope.

She gasped when she heard the throttle being shut off. The boat slowed and turned. She now clearly heard voices, excited voices.

She fled into the houseboat and locked herself in. The only light was the glow of a hurricane lamp in the kitchen. Slowly the rowing boat glided past the houseboat. She heard the voices of the three young men, half drunk. They were shouting. They were shouting at her. A clump of reeds was thrown at one of the windows, and she heard them laugh. From her hiding place she saw the mud slide slowly down the glass, darkness in darkness. She froze as the rowboat banged into the houseboat. An arm was stuck through the open window of the lavatory; greedy and horny, a hand glided along the wall around the window, fingers spread, like an animal trying to get in. Lin clasped the kitchen knife. She didn't have to remember what had once happened to her to be certain that she would use it. The hand disappeared. She still heard laughter. One voice frightened her the most: the instigator's. A second clump of mud burst apart against the window of the room. The boat banged into the deck. A figure leapt out and pressed his face against the doors to the deck. They hoisted the bottles of beer out of the water and cut them loose, then the three went away.

For a long time she did not dare come out of her hiding place.

She sat at the kitchen table, an open newspaper under her elbows. The only light came from the hurricane lamp. The flame cast grotesque shadows on the walls and the ceiling. The kitchen had again become an unknown spot, a spot that belonged to others where she didn't belong. She listened. The same sounds over and over: the reeds rustling in the night wind, the restless splashing of the water, sometimes a soft creaking of the boat, as if a large hand were pressing on it. Every unusual sound made her freeze.

Henri was gone for the night; that much was certain. Why? Why now, this weekend, when she was here in a boat and had nowhere to go? What the hell was he thinking of? Was he already feeling trapped because of her pregnancy? Was he angry because she had started talking about a new house, because she had had enough of living in his territory and thought it was fair for the three of them to make a fresh start somewhere else? Last year he had stayed out all night three times, and each time he had cheated on her.

Time crept along. Shortly before two she couldn't take it any more. In the bedroom she cleared his clothes off the shelf with one sweep of her hand, and for a moment was afraid that she had caused something terrible by doing that. In the dark living room she took her books away from Alex's photo. She opened the window, her hand almost paralysed with fear, and threw the flowers away. They bobbed up and down on the water. There were stars; there was the wind. She tried to imagine the outside world as nature, nature in a warm summer night. She had woken up under the mosquito net, where it was stuffy, and had got up for a while to feel the wind, to enjoy the silence. But the outside world was just a threat. Something was approaching. She shut the window just in time.

She lay on the bed, dressed, her shoes on. Henri's image forced its way into her thoughts. His bristly blond hair, tangled after swimming. His ears, which stood tight against his skull, as if he had grown up with a bell jar over his head. His light blue eyes. His shoulders. His beautiful strong legs, slightly bowed. All the things about him that had immediately made an impression on her, from the very first night. As if these were codes: his hair, how it fell, what it looked like.

The broad fingernails. The back, already slightly bent. His way of moving. The fact that he was shorter than she was. These were like codes; they *were* codes, but she didn't know their meaning. Why had nature driven her to Henri? Why had he been given power over her, why had she surrendered to his power? Is there anything, she thought, about which more lies are told than love?

She raised her head to listen. In the splashing of the waves she heard another rhythm, an rapid thumping. Were the waves beating against the bow of a rowing boat? Was it the sound of waves being crushed under a flat bow? In the reeds she heard a rustling that sounded different. They rustled as if they were being bent to one side, crushed beneath shoes. Her heart was pounding. She wanted to stand up and move around to shake off the fear, but she couldn't. Suddenly she was certain she heard something approaching. She sprang to her feet and stood there without moving. After standing still for several minutes, she walked stiffly into the darkness of the living room, a lit cigarette in her hand, wisps of smoke around her head, in order to make things look casual – just got up to enjoy the night and sneak a smoke. She opened the window to see if the flowers were still drifting. They were gone.

Again she lay in bed, in the muggy semi-darkness under the mosquito net. It was a net not just to keep out mosquitoes, she thought, but to ensnare her. Should she take it down? The thought preoccupied her for a time.

Once again the image of Henri forced its way into her consciousness. As she had seen him today – it was still today. How he had sat on the edge of the deck after swimming, his feet still in the water, water dripping down his back. Henri under the parasol with the frying pan in his hand, as he let the fried eggs slide onto her plate. How in the afternoon heat she had sat on the lavatory and held his sex against her cheek. His body revolted her now. She felt revulsion for the man himself too, contempt, disdain. But hadn't that been there from the start, from the first night they went out? A vague aversion to him, a certain contempt, which she had had to keep to herself? From the beginning derisive thoughts had floated through her head whenever she was with him, and she looked upon him with a

scornful gaze. How had she been able to keep it to herself? By knowing it and suppressing it. Time and again. Every day. Every hour. Knowing it and suppressing it. Because she was afraid of being alone, afraid to lose him. Because she was addicted to him, to the codes of his appearance, still a mystery, even after five years. Addicted to his body, to habits. She continually longed to love him, to be loved by him, and most of all she longed for the moment when she would be really with him and he with her. She needed him, a man, especially this man – who scared her. She had realized these things many times before. She had known it after a few months with Henri: that in some way, ultimately, she didn't respect him enough, that there was a vague distaste, that she continued to feel even in bed, and that she was afraid of him, his eyes, his teasing gaze. And yet she wanted to be with him. With enormous stubbornness she wanted to be with him, wanted to love him, wanted him to love her. Often enough she had looked scornfully at him. And yet he had to be hers. He only had to look at another woman and she flew into a rage. But how could she have this man's child? Was she deceiving him? After Jelmer had she deceived Henri? Was her deception ever more horrible than his?

Abruptly she stood up.

It was past three.

For a while she paced back and forth through the half-darkened houseboat, twenty steps forward, twenty steps back, trying to take the same number of steps in the same rooms, something she did not once succeed in doing. Her fear grew and grew. It was in the dark living room with its windows, where she felt so visible and vulnerable (they could also shoot at her) that her fear was the most intense; in the windowless bedrooms, it subsided; at the front door it intensified again. The fear of a murderer possessed her. He was on his way, close by now. Maybe there were two, just waiting for her to get exhausted. She closed the door between the front hall and the children's bedroom, stuck a piece of wood between the door handle and the floor so that she'd be covered from behind. From that side they'd now have to force two doors now. She no longer dared to go into the

kitchen with its window that looked out onto the reeds. She hid in the bedroom. She put the kitchen knife in an inconspicuous place, there for the taking.

Suddenly it released her.

She put out the cigarette on the frame of the bunk bed, and it was Henri's face she put it out on. She remembered how Henri had once fallen asleep with a lit cigarette in his hand. Carefully she had taken the cigarette from between his fingers, tapped it off, and then, looking at that sleeping face, she had felt that revulsion and had wanted to push the glowing tip into his cheek.

"Stop it!" She said it loudly and clearly. "Snap out of it!"

These were the things she said to herself when she was losing a match, sinking deeper and deeper, because she was once again playing *against* herself.

Her tense, distracted expression changed into a cheerful sneer. Go to bed, she said to herself. Be asleep when he comes back. He won't be expecting that. Lift one eyelid for just an instant when he climbs into bed, completely pissed; raise an eyelid to show him that he's been noticed, and then go back to sleep. Say nothing. Ask nothing. Let him tell his story and dish up his excuses tomorrow. Smile but say nothing, leave him hanging there. Do your own thing; don't give him the chance to get a hold of you. Raise an eyebrow every so often; smile at him and let him stew in his own juices. Be friendly; yes, you can even be friendly to him. Then ask him if he had a nice time, and make him sick, sick of himself, sick to death.

That seemed the ideal course of action.

But the frame of the bunk bed was again his face, which she'd put her cigarette out on. She split the back of his head with an ax and saw the blood. She felt tremendously guilty; she was also deceiving Henri. She had to break free of him, get away, before it was too late. Things weren't all right. She squeezed her hand between the bed frame and the coiled springs on which the mattress rested, hurting herself. Should she really leave Henri after all they had gone through together? They were a couple. By tomorrow evening she would be full of remorse, and she would try to forgive him. Maybe she could stay one day more.

This isn't right, she heard, this isn't right. She had to get away, as soon as possible, tomorrow. Say good-bye to that little being in her belly. Leave before it was too late.

She awoke with a start because something had jolted the houseboat, a powerful jolt that made the woodwork creak. It was light. She was on her feet at once. A second jolt, less violent. Only then did she notice the sound of an outboard motor.

Everything that had been building up inside her the night before now turned into motion, momentum, an uncontrolled and unstoppable impulse. She grabbed the oil lamp from the kitchen table, as she passed. She walked through the living room, threw open the doors to the deck, and there he stood, on the edge of the deck, his back to the water, a bit unsteady on his feet, his arms spreading slightly as if trying to maintain his balance, and behind him, off to one side was the rowing boat which he had just crashed into the deck at full speed. Also behind him, just off to one side, was the sun, slowly rising above the groves on the other side of the pond. Suspended above the water was a light mist.

For a moment Lin just stood there, taking in the scene. For a moment she was relieved that he was there, that he had come back. But the fuse was burning, and when she looked at him and saw the teasing smile, that smile with which he always tried to demean her, she exploded.

“You fucking bastard!”

She lunged at him with the oil lamp. Henri managed to block the blow with his arm; he took the lamp from her hand and tossed it easily away. As he did so, his defences were momentarily lowered, and Lin put both hands on his chest and gave him a shove.

“Bastard!”

Henri teetered.

He wasn't prepared for this. He was still proud that he'd been able to find the houseboat, in that labyrinth of ponds and canals, that he'd gone right to it. But something had gone wrong as he was pulling up: when he wanted to shut off the

throttle, he had opened it all the way and had crashed into the deck, and on the second attempt, despite concentrating on making the right movement, it had gone awry again, as if the devil were playing with it. Not so smart. But he was nevertheless proud that he had made it back to the houseboat, and was still impressed by the serenity of the newborn day: the sunrise, the mist everywhere, the silence and the splendour of the water. Everything was all right, it seemed, in spite of his indiscretion and guilt; his dirt dissolved in the country scene. On the way he had tried to pick her a water lily, but the stem, rubbery, slippery, proved to be unexpectedly tough, and when he had decided to sail on with the stem in his hand until it broke off, he soon found himself towing a gigantic root system, half a nature reserve, and he had had to let go. Behind these last impressions lay the night, a long night full of shadowy incidents, and behind that, painfully clear, the image of how it had begun: on his way back, with a can of petrol and the groceries in the bow, he had seen a lakeside hotel. On the deck of the hotel he had gotten angry after a few drinks and wanted to punish her for her contempt, for his never being good enough. Because he was going to be a father, he had resolved just to drink and stay out, no fucking around. He had gone from bar to bar. There were images of a night ride; he had stuck his head out of the window to make sure that his front left wheel stayed alongside the white line. Somewhere, he had picked up a girl, but after that he couldn't remember a thing. He momentarily remembered holding the slippery root of the water lily in his hand, but then he was already nearly home, and happy to be heading home, despite of everything. On that last pond, in that natural environment, everything had seemed all right, as if everything the two of them were connected to had a place in that. For a moment that was the way it seemed. The silence of the young day, that mist, that water with an oily quality to it, his hand that scooped it up. Everything was good. But he had turned the throttle the wrong way and crashed into the houseboat, not once but twice. He got angry when he saw her, all her clothes on, up all night getting stressed out, and he hadn't been able to say a word before getting it on the head with an oil lamp, and before he knew it he fell over.

Henri fell half on the rowing boat. His back struck the rowlock on the side, and the back of his head hit the iron rim. He didn't feel much pain, but everything went black. He slid into the water, unable to move. He remembered how he had tugged at the water lily and had pulled up a whole root system. He briefly tried to move with all his might; then he gave up. Just before he disappeared into the darkness, there was an overwhelming feeling of peace.

When he came to, he felt her arms around him. She was holding him above water, calling his name. He was nauseated. He immediately tried to feel what was the matter with his back, but could not reach it; his arm wasn't working. She dragged him through the water, half swimming, half wading, to the landing place, and pulled him onto the bank.

She sat next to him on her knees, gasping, in panic, asking over and over again what the matter was. Henri needed time to return to the world. When she finally saw him move his limbs, her fear subsided. Henri kept his eyes shut. He lay on the freshly cut reeds that she had placed there in parallel strips in order to hasten his homecoming. He said nothing. After a while he stood up.

After she had helped him to undress, Henri stretched out very carefully on his bed. Breathing was painful. He thought he could feel a crack in one of his ribs at the spot where the rowlock had hit him. He was still half drunk, still somewhere else. Lin looked at him in fear. He had not reacted to her apologies, her protestations of love.

“Go and look at the boat,” he said. “It's not tied up.”

She went out. All at once the reeds started to move; all at once there was wind. A slight ripple passed over the water. The boat drifted away. The silence made her sad. No one to help me, she thought as she undressed and heard her shoes, her clothes fall onto the deck piece by piece. But who *could* help me, she then thought. I have to help myself, but I can't. Suddenly she wanted to cut herself on the reeds. A reed made the thinnest, the finest cut in your skin. You took hold of one; you pulled on it, and it glided into your skin. The pain was soft, sensual. You gasped, and then you exhaled, liberated.

She swam to the boat. Hanging on to it, with her toes touching the soft, cool mud, she started to cry. It was the softness of the water, the silence of the early morning, heavy with memories, and the protection of the boat. She was hanging onto it; she pressed her cheek against it and cried. In this way she pushed the boat to the landing place. Tiny waves splashed against the bow. On her lips the water tasted sweet; it caressed her body as she glided through it. She was crying uncontrollably. She cried for something that seemed beyond her reach, even though it was close.

When she reached the shore, she stood up, sinking in the mud, and pushed the boat onto the bank. The bottom was chafed by the stubbly reeds. She recognized the sound: that's what it sounded like when her father would pull his boat ashore. She lifted the tail of the motor out of the water and turned it over, as he had taught her. While she squatted down to tie up the boat, she felt the first warmth of the sun on her body; she heard the rustling of the reeds, that familiar sound from long ago and she just kept on crying. She felt sick. She wanted to scream.

"Help me," she pleaded, gasping for air, "Oh, please help me!"

A few flies buzzed around her body.

When she finally went back inside the houseboat, she found Henri on the bed, his face contorted in pain. She was startled by the sight.

"Are you all right?"

Henri saw that she had been crying.

"A few bruised ribs, that's all."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Make me some coffee."

"Let me dry you first." She got a towel.

"Don't bother."

It was hardly necessary: it was warm, most of the moisture on his body had evaporated already. But she heard in his voice that something was up. She bent over him. Henri pushed her away, but it hurt so much to move, to make any

physical effort that he had to give up his resistance. She already knew, but she wanted to know for sure. She quickly bent over him and smelled his sex.

“You smell like a woman,” she said full of disgust.

She threw the towel in his face.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” said Henri.

“But I can’t take it!”

“It doesn’t mean anything!”

“Maybe not to you, but it does to me!”

She walked away. Henri heard a table being overturned in the room. She came back and looked at him. Henri parried her gaze with a teasing look. It was that look again, that malicious gleam in his eyes that made her explode. She slapped him in the face. All of a sudden she felt danger.

She jumped back. Henri stood up and came towards her. It was a man, but it seemed like an animal. He flung her at the wall, closed his hand round her throat, pressed her head against the wall and spat on her lips, twice. She collapsed, sobbing.

Fifteen minutes later she was making coffee and drying her tears. She brought him a cup of steaming hot coffee, a slice of bread, a cigarette; she gave him a light. They drank coffee together, Henri stretched out on the bed, she leaned against the wall. It was six-thirty. She saw the sunlight fall into the room, the thin, elongated shadows of the early morning. It promised to be a beautiful day.

“I want to get rid of it,” she said.