

Sample Translation

The Sleepless Hour of the Night

An extract from *Oefeningen in manhaftigheid*

(Exercises in Manliness)

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(Amsterdam: L.J. Veen, 1992)

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The Sleepless Hour of the Night

‘Maar ik ken de hitte des daags
en het slapeloos uur van de nacht
waarin de beslissing valt.’

Ida Gerhardt

De bultenaar

I

Bokslag wouldn't admit to melancholia, least of all seasonal melancholia, and the fact that on this September afternoon he was standing at the open window of his office and was staring out over the lawn had nothing to do with such an irrational feeling. He often stood like this and attempted to clear his mind of thoughts, to make it as empty as a jug with the wind blowing through it. Although every attempt was doomed to fail, this time he seemed to be reasonably successful. Granted, that was owing to the September light. An antique light. A light with a coppery sheen. The thoughts faded away all by themselves, if only you stared long enough at the yellowed grass between the motionless rhododendrons.

It was quiet and so warm it might have been July. The net curtain beside him billowed almost imperceptibly in the balmy breeze. He had switched off the radio fifteen minutes ago. They were broadcasting a speech by the Chancellor of Germany, that hothead, and he despised ranting and raving. All he heard now were occasional snatches of the voices of the patients sitting under the umbrellas on the left side of the house. He could even hear the tinkle of their globe-stoppered bottles. Yet the sound seemed to come from far away, as if a glass partition had been erected between the window he was standing in front of and the side of the house.

At the time, it was his fondness for symmetry that had made him decide to have the middle room on the first floor, across from the main staircase, fitted up

as an office instead of using the large, dark-brown paneled room downstairs as the previous medical directors had. The three tall windows in this upstairs room looked out on the spacious lawn in front of the house and on the row of trees marking the road; but what made the symmetry so perfect was that near the house the lawn was narrowed down on both sides by gigantic rhododendron bushes of the same shape and size. Therefore, when one looked out of the middle window, the rhododendrons lay exactly to the left and right of an imaginary mid-line. In the spring, these old and well-tended twin bushes were covered with enormous candy-colored flowers that enraptured the ladies and that Mrs. Stüberowitz, the Lithuanian, even arranged in water bowls in her room. Besides, it was nice to know, even though you couldn't see it from here, that both bushes had virtually identical hollow spaces inside them. They were occasionally discovered by visiting children who were playing in the garden: hollows so large that eight or ten people could stretch out inside them — which of course never happened.

The windows in this room opened inwards and, like all the upstairs windows, were equipped with leaf-patterned wrought-iron grills, two-and-a-half feet tall, which were intended to keep careless or emotionally unstable people from falling out. Under normal circumstances, no one had any difficulty looking out over the grills, but they posed a problem for Bokslag. For a long time, a simple orange crate had been placed before the middle window, but because it had become quite an eyesore, he had asked the carpenter a few years ago to build a simple but handsome oak platform along the entire width of the window, and this was what he was standing on now — almost achieving nothingness.

Had the door been open and had someone approached over the runner on the staircase, they would most assuredly have been struck by the symmetry: the massive desk in front of the middle window in the middle room with net curtains on either side and the spacious lawn with the rhododendron bushes on either side. The only asymmetrical element was the man himself looking out from his platform.

But the door wasn't open. The room was a private compartment in eternity, in which an immense, indifferent silence had now reigned for several minutes. Above Bokslag's head, a wasp flew inside. But it immediately panicked at the sight of so much nothingness and, banging wildly against the wrong windows, sought a way out.

Bokslag heard a car approaching over the graveled driveway before he saw it. A black-and-white Ford emerged from between the trees and stopped diagonally across from the main entrance. He retreated behind the net curtain but, caught up in the immobility of the stance he had maintained for so long, he was unable to bring himself to step down from his platform. The doorman had already come outside, hatless because of the heat, so that from here you could look down on his shiny pate, and walked towards the car. But before he reached it, the door on the righthand side opened and a young woman got out. A girl, a slender ginger-haired chit in a pale-gray dress: she looked him right in the face!

He stepped back so quickly that it was impossible to tell whether she had seen him, and fell from the platform with an awkward thud. But the fact that the wench had looked up right after getting out of the car implied that she must have seen him from inside the car, and that irritated him.

He went and sat at his desk, stabbed himself in the thigh with his letter-opener and glanced cursorily at the first page of the monthly drug inventory. There was no point in unscrewing the cap of his pen; as soon as the visitors had been led into the waiting room, the doorman would call him.

He already knew who they were: the scion of a well-known family of bankers who was bringing his niece. He'd talked to the man yesterday on the phone to confirm the appointment and already knew a little bit about the girl. An orphan, living with her uncle in Rotterdam. A delicate type...had taken the cure in Davos a few years ago and been declared cured, but had recently contracted another catarrh, a light case. Davos didn't seem to be necessary this time, but she needed rest and fresh air. Uncle didn't want to take any chances.

Sure enough, the doorman did call within two minutes to report that they were awaiting him in the reception room. He left his office and crossed mechanically to the elevator, until he realized that it had been out of operation all day. The damned thing dated from 1898 and urgently needed replacing. On days like these he regretted his decision to keep his office separate from the reception room, though he was always careful not to let it show.

While he was on his way down the stairs and had almost reached the landing in the middle of the staircase, he heard the door of the downstairs ladies' room open and shut and the rapid tap of high-heels scurrying through the corridor. He stood still and waited until he heard the door of the reception room open and close. There were a few situations that he avoided if at all possible, out of what you might call pride; that someone might see him coming down a staircase was one of them.

People’s reactions upon meeting Bokslag for the first time fell into a few stereotypes. Men looked down at him earnestly, as if they didn’t want him to doubt their respect, and hastened to enter into a weighty or business-like conversation. Women were, almost without exception, very friendly. Older women occasionally wanted to assume the role of the understanding mother, but dropped it fairly quickly and lapsed into either shy or condescending politeness, depending on their personality. But most of the women by far played “the Beauty and the Beast” with him. What struck him was that it was not the most beautiful women who entered into that game, but rather those who were endowed with fewer feminine graces, as if so ostentatious a display of the “Beast” made them feel the “Beauty.” He preferred the well-preserved, more mature type, the pampered wife with one or two children who no longer required much attention; the kind who crossed her legs when she sat across from him, with a smile on her face and a look that showed she could read his thoughts, and then languidly rearranged her chignon. It was a game that appealed to their own vanity, harmless, they thought, and he knew the game and played along with them. He even respected it, in his own way.

The banker shook his hand with a gravity that could scarcely restrain his own joviality. He was approaching fifty, had bright-red cheeks, full, red lips and pale-blue eyes that attempted to radiate good humor. He wore a tailored suit that camouflaged his stomach and a watch chain that you might say was silver except that it was white gold.

The niece responded to him the way children do. While the uncle spoke the words of greeting, she stood with her eyes wide open, intently taking his measure, and nearly forgot to put out her hand when she was introduced.

Her uncle laughed broadly, laid his hand on her delicate shoulder and stated in the hearty tone that Bokslag recognized as the one people used when they wanted to make up for someone else’s shyness towards him: “This young lady wants to go to Paris, my good Dr. Bertolet! To the art academy, if you please! Well, that remains to be seen, doesn’t it? But as long as she isn’t one hundred percent

healthy, it's out of the question, that's clear! One hundred percent and no less, my girl! We won't settle for less than that!

The girl was a fox, a vixen. Her hair, which was draped simply at her neck, wasn't really red, but rather blond with rust-colored highlights. Her face was narrow, her long, thin nose tipped up at the end and her light-brown eyes seemed to be just a tiny bit crooked. She was slight and endowed with few curves. She was nineteen years old.

The three of them sat down and discussed the medical situation. The uncle uttered expressions of concern. Bokslag listened and said "hmm." The girl laughed a few times as if they had said something entertaining, but said little herself. Nor did she play the Beauty and the Beast. She merely sat there looking him openly up and down. He barely looked at her, but observed that the wavy gray hair of his conversational partner was combed back meticulously and that he had the mouth of a gourmand and flaccid, bejeweled hands. Just outside his field of vision he could see the niece's thin, freckled arms resting in her lap; her calves, which were clad in ivory-colored stockings and tucked under her chair; and her long, narrow feet, in shoes that had a row of straps across the instep, with a button at the end of each strap. Italian shoes, he knew without asking.

The woman in charge of housekeeping finally arrived to show the newcomer to her room. The uncle went with them. For a moment, the three of them stood in a triangle in the doorway. The uncle spoke a few paternal words and laid a hand on the girl's elbow.

"You couldn't find yourself in better hands, ma petite!"

Bokslag sniffed, abruptly extended his hand in his customary manner and limped off on his orthopedic shoes.

His reputation as a superb doctor had come about on its own. The law of compensating talents. The blind had to be musical geniuses, hulking giants were really innocent children and unattractive virgins were paragons of virtue — the illusion of justice. And so the crooked gnome, who became a doctor in spite of it

all, had to be a talented man of medicine! A grotesque hunchback, a horrifying troll...that's true! But such a blessing for suffering mankind!

Unlike many of his kind, he totally lacked another compensating talent, namely the ability to captivate through eloquence, derision or a display of insight into human shortcomings, or the talent to persuade their fellow human beings that they possessed noble souls in their deformed bodies. But that was so much the better. His gruffness had become his trademark. In the circles of those who could permit themselves to have nervous breakdowns and rest cures, they raved about him and submitted in delight to his silence and gruff manners. His former fellow students at Leiden University, who would have turned him into their debating society's mascot if he'd let them, now sent him their overwrought wives. And they smiled at him and showed their legs and lay naked on his examining table; virtuous Beauties submitting to the skillful hands of the Beast.

No one knew him on a personal level. His person was inextricably intertwined with that of the Slagenstein Clinic. Almost literally, since he had obtained special permission from the board to live in a modest wing at the back of the building and there were weeks in which he never left the grounds. He was the soul of the clinic. A highly esteemed curiosity who had managed to make the hideousness of his body secondary to his medical intellect. No one thought it odd that he lacked a private life. A wife and children, hearth and home, were inconceivable in relation to him, and if he had ever wanted them, his desire had long ago been sublimated by the management of the clinic, which he ruled like a spider in its web.

Back in his office, Bokslag did not go and stand at the window again, but seated himself at his desk and started going through his paperwork, as he did every day at this hour provided nothing interfered. He checked lists, wrote a few short reports, listened without looking up and grunted his agreement with the reports of Nurse Gerth — who had come in to see him and was used to his style — inspected the inventory lists of the medicine cabinet and requested a call to a colleague in Beetsterzwaag. The switchboard reported that it was unable to

connect him and asked if he wanted to wait. He pivoted halfway around in his swivel chair and, with the phone at his ear, stared outside through the wrought-iron curlicues.

The September light was just as intense, but because the sun had left the room, the yellowed lawn seemed to belong to another reality. He looked back and forth over the mid-line between the rhododendrons. It was still very quiet. Monotonous axe blows resounded from the adjoining woods; that would be the ex-clergyman, who was so enamoured of his wood-chopping therapy that he couldn't stop, not even in this heat. By stretching his neck he could see that the banker's Ford was still parked at the entrance.

There was still no connection. He stared over the grass and his eyes turned glassy, but he failed to achieve the blankness that had seemed to be within his grasp earlier that afternoon.

He couldn't get the shoes with the straps out of his mind.

In Bokslag's case, the law of compensating talents was right in as much as he had an above-average intelligence and, what was more unusual, clear insight into himself. He knew that he wasn't a highly gifted doctor, but merely competent. He also knew that his profession made him more of an outsider to life than he already was by virtue of his personality and appearance. He who has friends, lovers and family can be a physician without coming to harm. But he who chooses loneliness and medicine tends to view people in the course of time as nothing but a collection of organisms; either well functioning or malfunctioning, but organisms just the same. And to see the laws governing all these organisms. Especially the laws.

Not that he denied the existence of the emotions and passions that drove these organisms. On the contrary, he recognized the striving for money, power and prestige, the desire for earthly existence, the longing for love, the fear of loneliness and death...he acknowledged their existence, recognized their symptoms and thought of them the way a lawyer thinks about laws in a legal

code. They were not his concern. He viewed the whole gamut of human emotions and drives as an observer, smiling or shrugging his shoulders, and thought of them more or less as diseases for which there was no cure.

He also saw himself primarily as an organism, plagued on the outside, but functioning well on the inside, and therefore a slave to the laws governing all flesh. He had no illusions about himself and no flattering thoughts with respect to his person, but it never cost him his peace of mind. He might have justifiably been proud of his achievements, but he wasn't. As for his appearance, he might have observed with pleasure the remarkably long, elegant hands on his misshapen body, but he never noticed them. Even the suits produced by his ingenious tailor provided him with mere satisfaction rather than pleasure.

There was only one thing about himself that pleased him: his name. One part of his name at any rate. His full name was Geerten Matthijs Bertolet-Bokslag. He shortened Geerten to Geert, but since no one ever called him by his first name, it hardly mattered. Matthijs was merely an initial on his letterhead. He loathed Bertolet and never included it when he introduced himself, but it had been quite useful to him in the past. And in the present for that matter. A double-barreled name can come in very handy to a hunchback. It added an air of distinction to a hump, especially when you come from a simple family of tradespeople. It had done him a great deal of good during his years at Leiden University; after all, no one there knew his family!

But his name was Bokslag! It was more than his name, it was his skin, his suit of armor! That name was stamped indelibly on his soul, in so far as he felt he had one. There was only one Bokslag. His entire family had only served to deliver him up as the personification of the name.

Anyone who telephoned him could hear it in the way he said his name. It rang like the clang of a hoof against the Bakelite phone.

“Bokslag speaking!”

II

The moon hung like a night-light above the woods and cast a pale glow over the back garden, where three large umbrellas had been collapsed and tied down. They stood arrayed on the lawn like dancers frozen in mid-pose. Here and there, a few rattan chairs and a table or two had also been left outside. Slackness on the part of the personnel. First one rabbit zigzagged across the lawn, and then another one. The moon lit up their white tails.

Actually, it was never totally quiet inside the house, not even at night. The woodwork groaned and creaked, the pipes hissed, and distant sounds could be heard from the doorman's room or from the right wing, which housed the patients who also needed night-time care. A door creaked: the night nurse was making her rounds before going off with the male charge nurse to drink coffee in the doorman's room.

No one ever went into the left wing at night, unless of course one of the patients called. The corridor in this wing contained seven windows, each of which protruded slightly from the wall in a bay. When the moon was bright, as it was now, it cast seven equi-distant pale squares on the parquet floor. The vague shadow in one of these squares was almost imperceptible. Anyone coming up the staircase and looking down the corridor would swear that it was empty.

III

October went by with lots of sun, wind and rain. The trees turned red, gold and brown and shed more and more leaves. The whist-bridge-chess season had begun, and a fire was lit every night in the downstairs salon.

The vixen quickly endeared herself to Slagenstein Clinic. She was impatient, impulsive, quick to take offence, finicky about food and unwilling to play cards, but she melted hearts anyway. They were not used to so much youth and restless energy. She wasn't interested in "resting." She took enthusiastic walks through the fall landscape, returning with her cheeks red, her wind-blown hair tucked

under an artistic, purple velvet beret and her arms full of multi-colored leaves, as if she wanted to say: I clearly don't belong here, there's nothing wrong with me!

The first time Bokslag examined her, he had barely removed the stethoscope from her chest before she popped the question.

“You're not going to keep me here for long, are you?”

“Turn over...” he said and began to tap her silk-like back, listening with his eyes vacant.

“You may get dressed now.”

Standing behind the screen, she asked him again.

“I won't have to stay a long time, will I?”

He sniffed and jotted down a few notes.

She quickly appeared before him fully dressed, sat down on the edge of the chair across from the desk and stared intently at him.

“Why all the hurry?” he asked in irritation.

“I want to leave,” she said with an insolent look.

She leaned back with her heels firmly entrenched in the carpet and stubbornly lowered her chin.

“I want to go to Paris. As soon as possible. And if I have to spend a long time taking the cure here...”

She pronounced the word with affected disgust.

“...the war might have broken out and my uncle won't let me go any more. Then I'll be stuck here for good!”

She fixed him with a look as if it would then be on *his* conscience.

“According to my uncle, there's going to be a war, at any rate he's afraid war will break out. It doesn't matter to me, except that I want to be in Paris when that happens.”

She sat in expectant silence.

He grunted above his notes.

“War or no war...you’ll be here three or four months for sure...maybe even longer...no way to tell. Rest is essential. If you don’t...”

The vixen jumped to her feet.

“Three months, I can agree to that! In Davos that was the least you could get! But no longer! After all, I’m not really very sick! My uncle is blowing it out of proportion! He’s doing it on purpose, because he knows I want to go away! But three months...It’s a deal. That means I’ll be out of here by Christmas and I can leave in January!”

Standing tall in front of his desk, she looked at him in defiance, with derision written all over her pampered mouth.

He didn’t respond. He rested his chin on his hands and looked back at her. Something terrible was taking place at the back of his eyes. She looked quickly away, shrugged her shoulders and resumed her seat.

“Rest is therefore essential,” he repeated. “From ten-thirty to twelve-thirty, sit on the balcony outside your room...with a blanket...from three to five sleep...with the windows open. Bedtime at ten o’clock...at the latest.”

She looked at her hands and stretched and rubbed the thin fingers with a timid face.

Stuck-up little minx.

“Yes, doctor,” she said in a childish voice. “Matty will be a good girl.”

“You’re doing it for yourself,” he said and angrily jiggled the telephone hook to request a call to the hospital which he wanted to conduct in her presence. They needed to send more x-rays.

“Besides, I’ve noticed some sores in the corners of your mouth.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ve had them before. They’ll go away.”

“I’ll give you some sulphide ointment to put on them.”

She had walked to the window. She wore a dark-blue dress and dark-blue shoes; between them her pale girlish calves were lit up like two thin pillars. The

shoes were fastened with a strap over the instep and had strange hourglass-shaped heels. Must be the latest fashion.

His interest in shoes was a legacy from the past that he couldn't shake off, the way others couldn't rid themselves of their Catholic childhood. His father had been a shoe salesman and had put the whole of what his soured emotions had to offer in the way of passion into "quality shoes." In and around their provincial town, his shoe store, "The Golden Slipper," was a household word. The family name, which his father flaunted wherever possible, was lettered aristocratically on the shop door: A.H.F. Bertolet-Bokslag.

His father...a suspicious, narrow-minded man with the soul of a tradesman, kneeling before the outstretched feet of women, wearing a smile he reserved exclusively for the store. His father on his bicycle, the rack piled with boxes, on his way to the wives of the town notables, who didn't come to the store themselves to try on "quality shoes," but ordered them sent to the house on approval.

His youth was filled with shoes. On Saturday afternoons or during vacations, he had to help in the store, and the clients either complimented him with undisguised pity or slipped him some change, which he was later obliged to hand over to his father. The names of the best French, English and Italian shoe manufacturers were drummed into him by his father, who told him he should count himself lucky — he, the wretched cripple — at the prospect of taking over such a flourishing business! The scorn spattered from his lips as he spoke.

As he sat doing his homework at the table in front of the upstairs window, the sun glinted unremittingly off the golden high-heeled slipper which was hanging outside. A slipper for a female giant.

His mother was too much his father's victim for him to be able to love her. She was a delicate, nervous creature wearing threadbare garments but exquisite shoes, who screamed and wept by night and hid her bruises by day.

When he was fifteen, the shoe kingdom came to an abrupt end. Seated at the table on Christmas eve, his father turned blue, gasped for air a few times and collapsed into his soup dish.

He could still see himself standing in the dark store when he went to fetch the doctor — who would merely find a corpse with vermicelli in its hair -- surrounded by fragrant leather and shadowy shelves of shoes, and he could still recall what he was planning to do: the next day he would take a stick and in savage triumph knock all the quality shoes from their stands and beat them until they lay battered and torn in the corner...those stylish, spineless little darlings!

The years that he and his mother subsequently spent together, in another house, were relatively good years. They had become closer, she appeared to be amenable to his desire to go to college, and when she suddenly died, in his third year at Leiden University, as unexpectedly as his father, he had felt abandoned and for a while even guilty that he hadn't been a better son. The last few years she had worn only cheap, inferior footwear, while daily polishing his expensive, handmade shoes, the “normal” left shoe and the higher right one, so that he might make a respectable appearance.

In the meantime, the vixen had started drawing portraits of the other residents. This caused quite a sensation and made her extremely popular. The first “head” that she sketched — without the object of her attention being aware of it — was that of the withdrawn and suicidal caviar dealer, Mr. Bast. According to Mrs. Stübberowitz, his tormented face had been reproduced with such feeling that she immediately offered to be the following object herself. After that came Mrs. Van Dil, the grim-faced but vain ex-clergyman, the giggly German chambermaid and goodness knows who else. Many of them had had their “head” framed or had simply pinned the drawing up in their room, and sketches or watercolors of Chinese ginger jars, leaf-entwined grapes or gods and goddesses in revealing poses were passed admiringly from hand to hand in the salon.

“Is she getting her sleep?” Bokslag asked Nurse Gerth with a frown. She shrugged her shoulders.

“I see to it as much as I can. But she’s like water, isn’t she? One minute she’s here and the next minute she’s gone!”

Nurse Gerth laughed while she said it. She too had sat for a portrait, in pastel yet!

“And she complains that because of all the daytime rest she can no longer fall asleep at night!”

“She shouldn’t make such a fuss,” he said.

“Okay, but maybe you should tell her that,” said Nurse Gerth. “That might make an impression!”

He would have found it easier to do without a hand rather than Nurse Gerth, of that Bokslag was sure, and she knew it too, even though they had never said anything of a personal nature to each other.

Nurse Gerth was a cheerful, level-headed middle-aged woman who let no one pull the wool over her eyes and whose reaction to everything and everyone was that she had seen it all before! She was the only one in the clinic who got on well with Bokslag, and she was indispensable to him in that he found out from her what most other doctors find out from their patients themselves, but what seldom came directly to *his* attention. And that was more than enough! Nurse Gerth, with her disarming matter-of-factness, was one of those types who invites confidences without even trying. Almost all the patients told *her* what was on their minds rather than their eccentric sourpuss of a doctor. For years she had served as an undisputed go-between and provided him with daily accounts of everything that was of importance to him.

This sometimes included sexual matters, and Nurse Gerth reported with an astonishing directness things would have caused many a colleague to blink. She spoke with a lack of inhibition that led one to suspect that she relegated any animal desires that weren’t meant to produce children to the category of mental or

physical aberrations that afflicted the patients, making it possible for her to talk about them with the same ease with which she discussed blood pressure or bowel movements.

Bokslag liked the fact that she didn't waste his time with digressions. Moreover, she rarely bothered him with drivel. She settled trivial matters herself, but was quick to identify matters of medical importance. For example, it was Nurse Gerth who made him aware of the side-effects of Morpheanum. While he had read about them in his medical journals, without her he would never have had them confirmed in practice!

In his usual Sunday afternoon bad mood, Bokslag stepped out of the elevator and crossed to his office to fetch a few files that should have been downstairs in the reception room. He loathed Sunday afternoons because he had to talk to one family member after another and wasted hours listening to all their gripes, which could have been dealt with in half an hour!

He grabbed the pile of files from his desk, slid another pile in its place to restore the symmetry of the desk top and was about to turn around and go downstairs when his attention was caught by a scene on the lawn.

The ex-clergyman's two noisy sons were visiting their father and had brought their scooter along with them, as they often did. Right at that moment, they were using it to cross over the lawn. The gardeners weren't there on Sundays and the doorman must be dozing off again! But they weren't alone. The vixen came running from behind the rhododendron bushes, heading for the boy on the scooter, so that he nearly bumped into her. She gave him a shove, which caused him to tumble on to the grass, grabbed the scooter and rode off on it, yanking savagely at the handlebars! He could hear her bright laughter through the closed windows. She was wearing a blue skirt that hugged her hips and flared out at the hem, and it fluttered in the wind. She bent her knees to make herself go faster, which caused her derriere to jut out at a sharp angle. She flew over the lawn like a modern witch.

The two boys set off in pursuit, first in tandem and then one on each side, so that she began to turn this way and that, lost her speed and finally allowed herself to be dragged screaming from the vehicle. The boys pushed her into the fallen leaves and the oldest, who was around twelve years old, sat on top of her and raised his hands above his head in a sign of victory. She made a few not very convincing attempts to get up and finally remained lying on her back, shaking gently with laughter. The boy continued to sit on top of her. He grabbed both her arms above the elbow, pushed them rhythmically against the ground, as if she were still resisting, and moved his body back and forth over hers. The vixen continued to lie there, moving her head from left to right, but had apparently surrendered. The boy continued moving. The brother watched.

The voice of the cleryman's wife rang out over the lawn. The boy stood up, brushed off his knees and adjusted something in his trousers. She stood up as well and, looking ostentatiously over her shoulder, started brushing the leaves from her jacket.

Bokslag sniffed, turned around and walked, stamping angrily with his right shoe, to the elevator.

IV

The sleepless hours are full of images. Images that do not go away but thrust themselves upon you with shameless tenacity, making you restless and demanding immediate satisfaction. Readers' hands have long since stopped turning the pages, and if the Victrola gets switched on — softly, it's in the middle of the night — the needle keeps going swish-swish in the last groove for a long time. An unbearable grating murmur.

The heating pipes hiss and clank noisily in the corridors. Hidden creatures are sending signals from cellars and attics, Morse code. The woodwork also creaks and settles. The staircase, the linen cupboards, the paneling, the parquet in the corridor in the left wing...

The night nurse drinks coffee in the doorman's room.

A woman in satin pyjamas is sleeping so soundly that it's as if her soul has left her body. Her inert hip curves beneath the covers. The large, white lilies on the table spread a faintly sweet scent. She seems to sleep the sleep of the drugged.

What compulsion drives the master thief? Or the mountain climber, or the deep-sea diver? Acquiring the booty, conquering the peak, discovering the wreck? Or coming face to face with the hollow eyes of fate?

Fate is an indifferent, but vigilant creature. It lies in wait, its eyes half closed. From time to time it yawns, showing its ferocious jaws. And then resumes its motionless pose. It can strike at any time. It only has to lay a paw on anyone who dares to approach with ropes and pick-axes, codes and keys, a tank of oxygen...and swallow him whole. It is sure to strike sometime ...but is now the time?

V

The elderly Mrs. Scheltema was given her zinc injections in her room.

When he had finished with her and had closed the door behind him, he hesitated for a moment. He never went into the room next door. But the latest x-rays had arrived this morning and why shouldn't he pass on his findings right away? Besides, Nurse Gerth had reported that she had complained about some painful spots on her tongue, and he needed to take a look at them.

He gave a short knock on the door and waited. There was no reply. She wasn't there, though it was in the middle of the rest period! He opened the door and looked inside.

The door to the balcony stood open, and the vixen lay wrapped in a blanket on the chaise longue. To avoid a draft, he quickly closed the door behind him and walked towards the balcony, scanning the room with his eyes. It looked arty and smelled of paint. Bad for the respiratory system.

She was asleep. She lay quiet and pale on her back, with her hands sticking out of the sleeves of a thick, padded jacket and folded across her chest, half under the blanket. Her hair trailed down from the chaise longue. Her blue, translucent eyelids were closed over her eyes, and the tip of her nose was red from the November cold.

She looked exceptionally obedient, surrendering herself to rest and fresh air according to regulations. This was evidently all part of her having promised “to be a good girl.” He hadn’t expected her to actually be asleep, and though he contemplated leaving the way he had come, he continued standing there looking at her in the winter sun.

Whether one likes or it, one is saddled with a lot of memories. He rarely allowed his memories to reach his conscious being. But they had a way of forcing themselves on him sometimes.

In his third year of medical school, they reported to the dissecting room every other week. His group had stabilized towards the end of the school year: three out of the original twenty students had dropped out for good, and those who remained had become so hardened that they no longer vomited, fainted or wept. Corpses were in ready supply: there was a lot of poverty in Leiden, and the school paid the next of kin a modest amount of money.

Two cases from this period had particularly stuck in his mind. The first case was, oddly enough, a chimpanzee belonging to an eccentric doctor in Leiden who performed the autopsy himself. The animal had died of intestinal cancer. He remembered the case because he had been moved by it: he had even felt himself turn white when the chimp’s body was displayed. A large, ashen head; short, crooked legs which were drawn up toward the stomach; scraggly hair. It was clear: he saw himself (and was unable to prevent himself from feeling a sharp pain in his abdomen when several tumors the size of eggs were removed from the animal’s body), but it wasn’t important and he rarely thought of it any more.

The other case rose more often to the smooth surface of his memory, which he endeavored to keep unruffled, and set off an ever-widening circle of ripples. He was usually able to keep them from spreading, but sometimes they seemed to expand on their own accord.

One particular afternoon, the professor had, as usual, started by discussing the peculiarities of the case at hand and had then drawn the sheet from the corpse of a young woman. A silence always came over the group when confronted with the object of the dissection, but this time the silence was more profound than ever. They had never had a young girl; most of the corpses were old. Moreover, there was something lovely and unreal about the corpse. The body had taken on the same color as the wavy hair, a delicate pastel yellow, so that the slender creature appeared to be carved of one and the same stone.

The professor apparently had no peculiarities to note and the laboratory assistant covered the body with the dissecting sheet faster than usual, leaving an opening around the stomach. The anatomy professor, who had turned over the dissection to the students weeks ago, had then looked around the circle and let his eyes come to rest on him.

“Would Mr. Bertolet please be so kind as to expose the peritoneum?” he had asked.

The motive for his matter-of-fact request was probably the fact that Bokslag had a reputation for being a stoic; seeing the embarrassed faces of the others, he naturally addressed *his* neutral face. Bokslag moved forward without saying a word, stepped on the platform that the assistant had slid next to the body, selected a scalpel and carried out the initial incision in deathly silence.

Even so, he was not unmoved by the incident. In between his precise movements, he saw himself standing there making the incisions through the eyes of the others: the hunchback violating the maiden, the Devil’s handyman at work! It seemed to him that carrying out this assignment sealed his fate: he was destined to go through life as an outsider. Moreover, it was as if by performing the task correctly and without emotion, something inside him had been lost forever,

something he didn't even know he had, some unknown quality that had been stillborn and now lay out of his reach forever.

He looked down at the neat lines he had made in the smooth, white abdominal wall, his ears rang with the intense concentration of his fellow students, and he unfolded the girl's abdomen for them in two perfectly symmetrical, thin slices.

He coughed.

She opened her eyes as if she hadn't been asleep at all and let his image imprint itself on her retina.

"Now you're actually sleeping and now someone disturbs you!" he said, and his mouth widened in a smile, for this was a witticism.

"Yes," she said.

"I received the new x-rays today and I thought: bring the report right away. The shadows haven't gotten any smaller. Not any bigger, but also not any smaller."

"Oh?" she said in bewilderment.

"So it's going slower than I had hoped."

"Does that mean that...that I can't leave at Christmas?"

He nodded.

"Perhaps at Easter."

"Her eyes darkened. She sat up.

"Shadows, shadows! As far as I can see, there are always shadows! They're supposed to be there! I feel fine! Doesn't that mean anything?!"

"Not enough. But everything will be all right. It just takes time."

She exhaled scornfully.

"Time! Yes, time! That's just what I don't have!"

"No?"

Now she got angry. She stood up and kicked the chaise longue so that it thudded against the railing of the balcony.

“No, Dr. Bertolet! No! Of course you can’t imagine that, you and the rest of the weak, sick and nauseating inmates of this place, but I absolutely do not have the time! I have to work on my talent! Not just sometime, in the distant future, but now!”

In an uncontrolled gesture, she pushed back a ginger lock that had gotten in her way, sniffed angrily and looked away from him towards the bare trees next to the house.

“If only I were twenty-one,” she said bitterly, “I’d pack my bags this minute. Then no one would have anything more to say about me!”

Her padded jacket had fallen open. She tightened the belt with such a jerk that it seemed as if she wanted to cut herself in two.

Bokslag never said comforting things to patients. That was Nurse Gerth’s job. He wouldn’t even know what kinds of comforting things to say. But he saw the neck muscles under the averted face contract and a hand rub convulsively back and forth under a sniveling nose.

“I thought you were already working on your talent here,” he said.

She turned around, filled with contempt.

“Ha. Ha. Ha,” she said.

He sniffed.

“You may stick your tongue out at me. That will give me a chance to take a look at it.”

“Go ahead and look. Maybe you’ll see some more shadows!” she said and hatefully stuck out her tongue, leaning way over to give him a good view of it. It was lined with sores.

He thought for a moment.

“Come to the examining room after rest hour. I want to take a blood sample.”

She shrugged her shoulders and turned her back on him.

He left the room.

“Miss Vroom asked me to give this to you,” said Nurse Gerth two days later.

She plunked a large yellow envelope down in front of him.

“Three guesses!” she said with a laugh and walked out the door.

He opened the envelope. It contained a charcoal sketch, a portrait of him. In the lower left corner was scrawled in India ink: For Dr. Bertolet-Bokslag, Your humble servant, Mathilde Vroom.

The portrait, a kind of bust, showed him standing in a doorway, or rather: looking around the corner of a door, with one hand on the door. Actually, only his protruding head, a shoulder and a hand were visible. Where the hump began, the contours faded politely away. Flattering, but a good likeness. His hair lay more elegantly on his head than his gray tufts did in reality, but it was certainly *his* crude skull. The sunken eyes under the uneven eyebrows regarded the viewer with too much friendliness, but they were certainly *his* deep-set eyes. His chin, which he knew to be rough since he frequently rested it in the palm of his hand, looked smooth and shiny, but was pronounced enough. He also immediately recognized the jacket he was wearing, the wooly brown one with the narrow lapels. He made an involuntary attempt to bend his right hand into the same pose as in the sketch and was forced to conclude that while the sketched hand was admittedly too elegant, it was indeed, let’s be honest, *his* hand.

Your humble servant, Mathilde Vroom.

He didn’t like art. He regarded almost everything he had ever set his eyes on as superfluous. Mere showing off. Okay, not everything; he had a few books with reproductions, Velasquez, Vermeer, the painters of the Italian Renaissance. He even glanced through the last volume quite often; there was one portrait that always kept him from turning the page right away: Vasari’s portrait of Lorenzo il Magnifico. And last year, in the same building that housed a medical convention, he had seen an exhibition of an Austrian or a German painter, a man named Kokoschka, who it seemed had more or less fallen into disgrace in Germany. He had been so struck by the man’s work that he’d even considered buying something. Imagine him, buying a painting! In the end, he didn’t do it after all.

But this kind of thing...artwork for ladies!

He exhaled a few times through his nose to denote amusement and asked himself how she had managed it without his posing. The situation in the sketch reminded him the most of the way he sometimes looked around the corner of the dining room, but she certainly hadn't been sitting there with a sketchbook in her hand! Your humble servant...Pampered little viper!

He shoved the drawing back in the envelope, placed it in one of his desk drawers and started working.

The laboratory had examined the blood sample and sent the results. Full of spirochetes. Syphilis. Advanced stage.

He discussed it with Nurse Gerth, who raised her eyebrows.

"Goodness gracious!" she said.

"We'll begin with the usual injections," he said. "Neosalvarsan. Later perhaps bismuth salt. It might be an old infection...Please talk to her."

But talking produced few results. The vixen was uncommunicative. She had no idea when she had been infected and she didn't give the name of the person who infected her. She felt no need to confide in Nurse Gerth.

She also kept her silence when he gave her the injections. And he remained silent because she did. It might already have infected the spinal cord, he thought. In a month or two he'd have to perform a spinal puncture.

Her moods fluctuated even more than usual. Sometimes she was exuberantly cheerful and tap-danced through the salon. At other times she was overflowing with criticism and never missed an opportunity to point out how old-fashioned and narrow-minded they all were. But since she'd found out that she was far from being finished with her "cure," she was often quiet and sulky and didn't want to eat anything except dessert. Like many of the patients, she was going to spend Christmas and New Year's at home, and she had already repeatedly announced that she wasn't going to come back after that!

VI

“Morpheanum may be the best way to induce sleep,” said Nurse Gerth, while Bokslag continued to write a report without looking up, “but the side-effects can be quite unpleasant, you know. The darn stuff acts like Spanish fly!”

Eroticism was so far removed from Miss Gerth’s good-natured nursiness that she never asked herself whether one should even know or talk about an aphrodisiac like Spanish fly. It was something she did know and talk about; she was simply comparing two “medicines,” and Bokslag only looked up questioningly because she had remained silent after making this observation.

“Well?”

“Mrs. Stüberowitz keeps dreaming that she’s having sexual intercourse...” continued Nurse Gerth.

He impatiently shrugged his shoulders.

“So?”

“With you.”

He leaned way back in his chair, sighed and flung his fountain pen down on the desk in irritation.

“Did she say that?!”

“Yes,” said Nurse Gerth.

Her plain face looked no different now than it usually did.

“She did say that. And you know how she carries on about her dreams, don’t you? They prophesy something...or tell something about a previous life...or her spirit was up to something while her body was asleep or vice versa...goodness knows what all.”

She shrugged her shoulders impatiently. Mrs. Stüberowitz always demanded so much attention that it was even too much for her sometimes.

“But she also talks about it to Mrs. Van Dil and some of the others...and that’s extremely annoying! Before you know it, strange rumors will be flying around the clinic!”

“Now she’s gone too far,” said Bokslag slowly.

He had turned his chair around and was staring over the grass.

“I’ll take the matter up with her myself.”

“Shall we switch to another sleeping powder?” asked Nurse Gerth.

He thought it over.

“Not yet. She’s reacting fine to Morpheanum. Except for this kind of idiotic behavior. I’ll talk to her.”

“Do that,” said Nurse Gerth cheerfully.

He rarely went to the woods behind the house, but today was brilliant winter weather. Axe blows could be heard behind the former stables, but they were different than usual, softer and less regular. Not like those of the ex-clergyman. He automatically headed in that direction. Bright laughter could be heard near the stables.

The large, heavy figure of the minister, dressed in boots, corduroy trousers and a cable-knit sweater, was standing with his back to him, watching the vixen trying, without success, to split a log that was way too heavy. The axe was stuck halfway in the log, but she was barely strong enough to lift both the axe and the log let alone bang them against the chopping block! Besides, she was giggling so hard she almost fell over. The minister, adding his bass laughter to hers, was giving her pointers. But then he went and stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her and grabbed the axe, with his legs spread wide, and together the two of them raised the axe high. The vixen was entirely hidden by him; between the wide-spread legs, he could only glimpse a bit of her skirt and the backs of her calves in her brown, mid-length fur-lined boots. The axe descended with a bang and the log was split in two. The clergyman continued to hold the implement for at least five seconds too long.

That fellow has to go, was his first thought. I’ll discuss the matter with his wife on Sunday. His heart’s been fine for ages — there was probably nothing wrong in the first place — he’d be better off telling his delusions to a psychiatrist, and at his age the fact that he’s lost his faith in God is healthy! It’s a wonder the

church board didn't sack him ages ago! Charlatan! Conceited numbskull!
Chopping down the entire woods just to develop his biceps!

He came closer. The clergyman nodded and tempered his high spirits. The vixen called: "Let me show you how I can chop wood, Dr. Bertolet!"

"Are you going to leave us any trees?" he curtly asked the giant.

Later that afternoon he had her in the examining room. She was reacting very well to the Neosalvarsan. The sores had disappeared long ago.

"I would like to bring your attention to the fact that it's still highly contagious," he said, looking her sternly in the face.

She was shrewd enough to start blushing immediately.

"Aren't you the bold one," she blurted out and was immediately so shocked by her own boldness that she became even redder and turned away from him with her head down in genuine confusion.

"I'm a doctor," he said coolly to her chignon, from which tiny wisps of hairs had escaped at the nape of her neck; orangish-blond hairs, as soft as the down feather of a baby chick.

Mrs. Stüberowitz was still sitting engrossed in her book in the library section of the salon when almost everyone else had already gone to the dining room. In the light from the reading lamp, the cluster of feathers she wore in her hair turned an inky black and the black velvet gown draped over her ample figure gleamed like the hide of an animal. Though she must have heard his awkward step on the parquet floor, she only looked up when he was standing directly in front of her. Her double chin disappeared and she spread her lipstick-covered lips in a smile.

"Did you know, Dr. Bertolet..." she said, tilting back her head until the jewels at her neck sparkled, "that in India, the Hindu faith requires widows to be burned along with their deceased husbands? Imagine, getting onto the funeral pyre with the corpse! And it's still being practiced on a very large scale!"

Bokslag gave her a piercing look.

“I want you to stop spreading ridiculous rumors,” he said.

She slowly righted her head while her face turned a deep pink under her face powder.

“What do you mean...” she said hesitantly.

“You know what I mean,” he said. “I don’t like it and I don’t want to hear another word on the subject!”

He turned and stamped out of the salon.

In the past months, the banker had visited at regular intervals. Always without the aunt, who did exist, but never came with him. He brought his niece candy or art supplies, took walks and drank tea with her and talked to Bokslag in a jovial but solicitous tone of voice. Bokslag had, with some reservations, cited a time period — at least another five or six months — but had left out any mention of the syphilis. She had expressly asked him not to. That was her business, she’d said to Nurse Gerth, and she’d take care of it herself. But she had apparently not informed her uncle. There was no sign that he was aware of it. Wasn’t the most likely explanation that she’d concealed an unwelcome lover from him?

Still, he didn’t believe it. Those who are mere spectators in life tend to have the eyes of a hawk.

At three o’clock in the afternoon, she sat drawing on the sun porch as though she had never heard of the afternoon rest period. She held a sketchbook on her lap and a piece of charcoal in her hand and moved her head up and down between the paper and the windowsill. She had draped a piece of tulle over the stuffed squirrel that had adorned the windowsill forever and a day, clasped a pearl necklace around its neck and stuck a flat Egyptian cigarette in its front paws. She was sketching in that same exaggeratedly attentive way of hers, holding her head coquettishly in various positions and alternately looking in the direction of the object of her study and the sketchbook in her lap. As if she were play-acting for herself.

She had pinned up her ginger hair. The watery December sun caressed her right cheek, her pointy nose, her neck and her white blouse, under which he could see the straps of her underwear. Her back didn't touch the back of the chair. She kept her legs under the chair, with one toe of her shoe propped up against the floor and the other foot draped loosely across it. The high-heeled shoe belonging to this foot had slipped off and lay nearby on its side.

For no apparent reason, she suddenly turned around.

“You are supposed to be resting,” he said.

“You nearly scared me to death!” she answered.

She turned around again, but didn't resume her sketching.

“Why aren't you lying in bed?”

She twisted the charcoal around and around between her fingers and gave a slight shrug of her shoulders.

“Otherwise I won't be able to sleep again tonight.”

“Then we'll make you rest! You'll be given a sleeping powder. Nurse Gerth will give you one tonight. From now on, I don't want to see you downstairs during rest hours. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” she said and turned to face him with a modesty bordering on impudence.

“Yes, doctor.”

He walked away. More of that “your humble servant” business, he thought.

An interview with Rascha Peper

“I feel a real daughter of Freud”

by Jeroen Kuypers & Piet de Moor

(De Morgen, 14 augustus 1997)

Dutch writer Rascha Peper is one of these authors who are apparently better appreciated and get bigger print runs with each new publication. She had previously published the novels *Oesters* (Oysters), *Rico's vleugels* (Rico's Wings) and *Russisch blauw* (Russian Blue). Recently, the stories from her first collection, *De waterdame* (The Water Lady, 1990) and those featuring in *Oefeningen in manhaftigheid* (Exercises in Manfulness), which appeared three years later, were added to some prose as yet unpublished in book form, and published as the voluminous collection *Alle verhalen* (Collected Stories).

Rascha Peper really writes novellas, not short stories. The lives of the various characters she portrays in these are often completely turned inside out by a seemingly unimportant event. For an Amsterdam pornographer it is a meeting with a girl who does the accounts for an antique dealer friend, for a medieval Sicilian monk it is meeting the son of the German emperor Barbarossa, and for a 32-year-old homosexual painter it is the confrontation with the art city of Florence which is apparently fatal.

In each instance the fatal event evokes hidden memories or feelings. Like a true daughter of Freud, Rascha Peper toys with processes known from psychoanalysis, but unlike with the person on the couch, awareness in her characters hardly ever leads to a cure. Instead, it is the prelude to their ruin. The pornographer, for example, can no longer concentrate on his work. Instead of creating an end to the constrictor-like story, he spends every evening searching futilely for the girl who is the love of his life. The Sicilian monk no longer finds pleasure in copying manuscripts, and secretly writes the story of his friendship with the emperor's son on two rolls of rejected parchment. The homosexual painter realises how insignificant his own talent is compared to that of the great painters of the Renaissance.

We spoke to a writer who doesn't just get inspiration from her own life, but who makes an effort and possesses the skill to enter into the very soul of different people of different times and different sexes.

Many of your stories start with a quotation. As a reader, therefore, you get the impression that the quotation has been used because those few lines are the prelude to dozens of pages of prose. At the same time, the quotation conveys the essence of the story.

‘It is true that I often get an idea for a story from a quotation from a book or a short newspaper article. Ten years ago, for instance, I first read about the so-called “Stendhal Syndrome”. Apparently, during a visit to the Italian city of Florence the well known 19th-century French writer was so overwhelmed by the beauty of the buildings and the art in general that it literally made him sick. The same apparently happens to a growing number of modern tourists.

My first reaction was that it was a stunt by the Florentine Counsellor for Tourism. The number of visitors had probably declined, so something had to be done to boost numbers. If necessary we could try something like this in Amsterdam with, for instance, the “Cobra Syndrome,” and in Antwerp they could try the “Rubens Syndrome”. To be honest, I still believe that, but at the same time it seemed a wonderful theme for a short story. It resulted in ‘Opus Benotii’, about a homosexual painter who, after his older, rich friend has left him, goes on holiday to Florence.

For ‘Een Siciliaanse lekkernij’ (A Sicilian Delicacy) I let myself be inspired by a quotation from Helène Nolthenius’ biography of Francis of Assisi, *Een man uit het dal van Spoleto* (A Man from the Valley of Spoleto). In it, she describes in a few lines how Princess Constantia, the wife to be of King Henricus, son of Emperor Barbarossa, travels from Sicily to Turin with an enormous entourage of ladies-in-waiting, soldiers and horses. I wondered what might have happened during that journey, and before I knew it I was creating a story.’

But surely your imagination is not enough? In this novella in particular you demonstrate a sound knowledge of history.

‘I knew Umbria, the area where the story is set, fairly well, but it is true that I had to do lengthy research into the twelfth century. I wanted my characters to dress, act and think like people from the twelfth century, not the twentieth. For instance, when one night the first-person narrator, the young monk Filippo Bernardi, is secretly travelling with Henricus on horseback to Constantia’s procession and passes a humble wooden cross, I allowed him voice doubts about religion. The next morning, on the way back, however, I let him be filled with shame and remorse about his blasphemous thoughts. It would have been nice to let him express our modern, atheist thoughts for a moment, but it is very unlikely that those doubts would have made him an unbeliever.’

Did you have to adapt much of the story you invented to the facts you uncovered during your research?

‘It wasn’t too bad, actually. Usually I have a quite a detailed idea of the plot in my head before I start, and I’m also quite good at estimating how long the story will be. A short story never turns into a novel, however long it may become. There is just one thing which really bothered me. The action is set in 1186, but the castle where the major part of ‘Een Siciliaanse lekkernij’ is set apparently burnt down completely in 1185. I found that out only after I had finished the writing. I thought about looking for another castle, but that meant more work and rewriting, and who knows what historical fact might have spoilt things then? I’ve attempted to write a story which really could have happened, but in the end my imagination was always undermined by some historical fact.’

In a number of your stories and two out of three of your novels an important theme is the young woman or man who has a relationship with a roughly twenty year older man. Why did you repeat this so often? Because it is autobiographical or because you wanted to show it from different perspectives?

‘Its origins are biographical, but that’s not the reason why I’ve used it so often. A young person who experiences his or her first love and an older person who experiences his last will necessarily experience the relationship very intensely. You can easily relate it to concepts such as the will to live and the fear of dying. In short, it’s an ideal subject for a writer. In that sense you could consider a story like ‘Meeuwen’ (Seagulls) a kind of finger exercise for my first novel, *Oesters*. Both in the short story and the novel there is a woman in her forties who has had a relationship with an older man when she was younger. Partly as a result of pressure from her environment, she chooses to break off that relationship and marry someone her own age, but twenty years later her conscience begins to trouble her and she wonders whether she has done the right thing. In my second novel, *Rico’s vleugels*, I let a sixty-year-old man fall in love with a boy. So for that story I crept even deeper into the skin of the other party than I’d done in *Oesters* and the short stories. But with that the theme really was exhausted. I don’t think I’ll write about it again.’

Except for the fact that this theme might recur as a less important character who happens to have a relationship with an older man, as in the case of the girl living next door the main character in ‘Een sjerp van rode zijde’ (A Red Silk Sash).

‘In that story it has a clear function in relation to the main theme. The sixteen-year-old boy who plays the main role is in love with the girl next door, Linda who, however, is entirely unattainable. He fantasises about her a great deal, but he doesn’t even dare speak to her in the street. To make matters worse, he

discovers that his jovial father, who has already left his family once for a young French beautician, gets on rather well with her. A bit too well, even.'

Reliving the classical Oedipus situation. It is remarkable how well your stories often comply with Freudian schemes. The pornographer in 'Notities van een pornograaf' (Notes of a Pornographer) doesn't accidentally fall in love with the accountant of the only man who still links him with his childhood. Still, your characters' awakening is always half-hearted and never leads to purification. Why not?

'Perhaps because they're never pleasant things they become aware of. What in the world does a pornographer, who has spent his entire adult life with prostitutes and strumpets do with an innocent girl like an antique dealer's accountant? What can the middle aged woman do with the insight that she should have married the love of her youth? The man has meanwhile died and has been buried. What else can the Sicilian monk who, through his short friendship with the son of the emperor, has had a taste of real life and even love do other than pine away in his monastery cell for the rest of his life? The homosexual painter in Florence is relatively well off, but comparing yourself with Da Vinci and Michelangelo and discovering that the only thing you're good at is drawing a pair of shoes you see in a shop window isn't very uplifting either. In some senses I feel a real daughter of Freud's. Perhaps it is meaningful in this respect that I found the discipline to write only when I lived in Vienna for a long time, where my husband had to be for his work. However, unlike in analysis on the sofa, in my stories there is no cure, at most there is quiet resignation.'

You describe quite a few dreams in your stories. Is that also under the influence of psychoanalysis?

'Not really. I use the dream mostly as a technical device to allow the reader a glimpse, as it were, into my characters' innermost psyche. The dream aspect is important for the story, but is otherwise difficult to fit in. However, the reader probably reads more into it than I put in. For instance, the homosexual painter in Florence dreams at some point of an enormous fish in a large fish tank which needs but fails to get urgent care. Such a fish really exists. His ex-boyfriend Bruno received one as a present. He wanted to flush him down the toilet straight away, but the painter couldn't bring himself to do it and looked after him for years. Bruno wasn't grateful for this. On the contrary, it proved to him that his boyfriend was a silly cow, a drudge who wipes the shit off his shoes and makes coffee for the cleaning lady, and who is therefore uninteresting. The scene with the fish is autobiographical. My son once had a fish, but of course, after two days he lost interest, with the result that for years I refreshed the water and fed the animal freshly caught mosquitoes and fruit flies. So the dream is nothing more

than a memory of mine, but it's been described in such a way that the reader automatically reads all kinds of symbolism in it. That is the power of literature.'

So as readers we shouldn't read anything into the fact that you like and are good at imagining being a male character?

'That's right. I consider it a challenge to see the world through the eyes of a man now and then. Besides, it's not that difficult for a woman. And the opposite is true as well. Didn't Frederik van Eeden paint a very realistic portrait of a woman in *Van de koele meren des doods* (*The Deeps of Deliverance*)? And don't forget that *Madame Bovary* was written by a man. We're always made aware of the differences between the sexes, but in fact we have much more in common than we think. A man and a woman both type with ten fingers, and when they hurt their noses, they both feel the same pain. What's important is not so much the sex of a person, but the personality. Perhaps we should give that some more thought.'