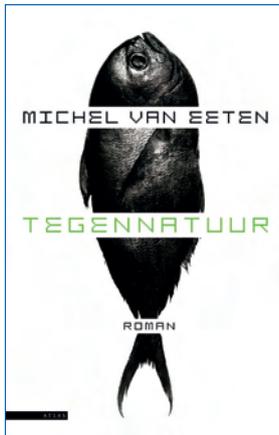


## The concept of nature deconstructed



# Michel van Eeten

## Anti-Nature

**M**ICHEL VAN EETEN has a tremendous talent for looking at things from the reverse side. At times this arises out of a kind of wonderment, at times from a cynicism akin to that of Houellebecq, with such sentences as: 'Some people derived an infectious zest for life from the injustice and calamity that afflict others. It was

called engagement.' Throughout the novel, the concept of nature is turned on its head – a form of deconstruction that dismantles it almost completely.

Grad Vaessen is a young Dutch scientist carrying out research into conservation at Berkeley, California, with an American professor, Leslie Breitbart. In California attempts are made to conserve nature while also serving agriculture and the state's urban population. It becomes increasingly clear to Grad that conserving protected species of fish and making sure hydro-electric power stations have sufficient water while at the same time ensuring people in the cities have enough to drink is an impossible task. Everyone involved knows that. Grad and Leslie encounter a kind of NASA command and control centre where the volume of water is divided up, projects in which fish are moved around by boat, and dykes whose maintenance is permitted only if they do not belong to nature. Slowly the whole concept of nature is reversed. What actually is nature? 'We're looking at the wrong nature,' says Leslie at one point, his eyes focused on a piece of land. In the second part of the book, in which Grad and Leslie research the Everglades in Florida, one of their respondents says that urbanization and sugar-cane cultivation should be included in the nature reserve, hence incorporating human activity into nature. Anti-nature becomes nature. Nature becomes anti-nature.

This debate is the focus of the novel. At the same time, at another level, Grad's own 'nature' is deconstructed. He is introduced as a heterosexual, with a pleasant, socially aware girlfriend in the Netherlands, but Leslie, a married homosexual, flirts with him. Grad finds himself thinking, 'You can't be too dogmatic about this kind of thing,' and the time comes when Grad ends up in bed with Leslie. Feeling like a scientist in need of recalibration, he departs for home bewildered.

So the novel ends pretty nihilistically, which is where Van Eeten slots in with Arnon Grunberg and Michel Houellebecq. But his succinct style's all his own, replete with surprising images and comparisons, which makes him entertaining to read, especially in his sketch of Leslie and his wife as archetypes of the neurotic intellectual American surrounded by an army of therapists.

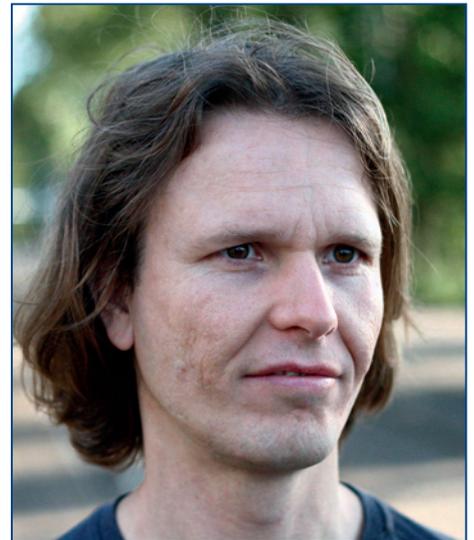


photo Wijnand Veeneman

Michel van Eeten (b. 1970) is an associate professor at the School of Technology, Policy and Management at Delft University of Technology. He gained his doctorate with a thesis (once thought too literary) entitled *Dialogues of the Deaf: Defining New Agendas for Environmental Deadlocks*. Among the subjects he has focused on in his policy research are cyber-criminals, train conductors and reindeer managers. Van Eeten is also an enthusiastic blogger. His *bijzinnen.com* was awarded the 2008 prize for the best-written Dutch weblog.

Van Eeten reaches beyond cynicism for a philosophical layer, that of being successfully imperfect, of technology as anti-nature, and of destruction being the only way to save something. *DELTA*

The book is full of apt observations and ironic comments. By the end you have, amazingly, learned a lot about nature conservation, even though you simply wanted to know how the story turned out. If only every scientist could sell his research in novels like this. *VPRO*

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Sample Translation

*Tegennatuur*

(Anti-Nature)

by Michel van Eeten

(Amsterdam: Atlas, 2008)

Translated by S.J. Leinbach

## The wrong kind of nature

When the dog made its appearance, Grad got up, opened the door and began petting it right away, no longer waiting for it to nuzzle him. That way was better, more efficient.

‘Good morning, guy.’ Leslie greeted Grad briskly as he entered the living room.

‘Morning.’

‘You know, we misinterpreted some of your data.’ It sounded a bit triumphant.

Grad missed most of the explanation that followed, tangled up as he was in the notion that at some point in the past several hours Leslie had been thinking about the data in the article. They’d worked on it till midnight, and it was now 7:30 in the morning.

A few days ago, he had bought a green mountain bike at a bicycle shop, a cheap Chinese model with gears that stuck. But at least it meant that he didn’t have to study the bus schedule every time he wanted to go anywhere.

He cycled to campus to continue working on his article with Leslie. All afternoon they sat side by side at a computer screen while Leslie edited the text, sentence by sentence. On reaching the end of the file, they went over the whole thing again. It was a good article. Leslie had successfully purged it of the plodding prose of someone trying to grind out a dissertation.

Leslie thought the article should be sent to the most prestigious periodical in their field, the *International Journal of Public Policy*. To Grad, the suggestion that his work should be submitted to such a publication sounded like a joke, a lame one at that.

‘One other thing,’ said Leslie. ‘I’ve been thinking, I don’t want to be credited as co-author.’

‘Okay,’ said Grad surprised, uncomfortable that he hadn’t brought up the subject of authorship himself. Leslie’s gesture was exceptionally generous; he

had made an important contribution to the article, and co-authorship would have been the normal reward. Leslie, too, could have benefited from publishing in a journal of that stature.

‘Why not send it off rightaway?’ Leslie suggested, ‘then I can finish other stuff.’

An hour later Grad had brought the article in line with the periodical’s house style and made five copies of it. He put it all in a large envelope. They passed the mailroom on the way out. Grad hesitated at the blue box for outgoing mail, not wanting to let go of the envelope with its massive stack of paper, the tangible pleasure of a job well done. He had a momentary urge to rub the smooth envelope against his cheek then clasp the package to his chest. But he dropped it in the outbox. With that he officially signaled the moment of completion. Right afterwards all sorts of unfinished business clamored for his attention. Human contentment was so ephemeral that, from an evolutionary perspective, satisfaction must have been a losing strategy.

At the corner of Shattuck and Hearst, a stone’s throw from campus, there was a coffee shop that was frequented mainly by students, with their textbooks, laptops and music players. As they entered they saw Rudy Tockner at a small table by the window, a man with a shaved, suntanned head and a tight black turtleneck sweater that showed off the contours of his well-trained body. He was a professor of ecology at Berkeley and the brains behind CALFED’s new ecosystem recovery plan.

During Leslie’s pitch he looked skeptical. He sipped his espresso and remarked dolefully that he’d save his questions about their methodology for later.

‘We’d be very interested to hear your questions and commentary,’ said Leslie unfazed. Then he segued seamlessly into the questionnaire.

Tockner talked about their attempts to create a new habitat for endangered species. ‘Two year ago the dikes on Prospect Island were breached, and the island was flooded. An unintended side effect was that some wonderful new wetlands

were created. Last year we went out to see if anything had actually moved into the habitat, and sure enough, it was teeming with animals. Unfortunately, they were the wrong kinds of animals, invasive species, like the Chinese mitten crab. They came across the Pacific about ten years ago as stowaways, and within a few years had completely colonized the Bay Area. The local species have been displaced. Now the mitten crab is migrating further and further inland. The exotic species are doing better than the local ones, which has seriously hampered the recovery of the endangered species.'

'In light of the zero-tolerance policy established by the Endangered Species Act, that seems like a risky outcome,' said Leslie. 'How can you reliably create a habitat, if you run the risk that the invasive species are going to displace the endangered ones?'

Tockner shook his head. 'You're asking the wrong questions. Ecologists don't believe in reliability.'

Leslie glanced sideways at Grad to see if he'd noted that last sentence. Grad could see in his eyes that that he thought the quote would make a good hook for the report.

'Ecosystems are too complex to manage. Environmental management is an absurd notion, part of a myth that ecosystems are malleable. They're too unpredictable and poorly understood for that. In fact, it's our attempts to control nature that have led to the current crisis.'

'If environmental management is impossible, should we just give up on endangered species?' asked Leslie.

'No.' Tockner sighed. 'Look, try to see it from the opposite perspective: the system is so complex that nothing ever turns out the way we intended. I really don't think we could exterminate those species if we tried.'

That last remark seemed to catch even Tockner by surprise. He glanced uneasily at Grad's typing fingers. There was something reassuring, even comforting, about that remark, and comfort is suspect. In a crisis you're supposed to sound the alarm, not offer comfort.

‘That last sentence is off the record,’ said Tockner.

Grad pretended to delete the words in question, by hitting the backspace key a few times. He didn’t want to let it go. There was beauty in the idea that some things couldn’t be exterminated. He remembered a psychological study of people who had endured horrendous adversity and later embraced it as the best thing that had ever happened to them. One of the participants had spent 37 years in prison for a crime he hadn’t committed. Afterwards he said he wouldn’t have missed a minute of it.

Adversity was everywhere, but happiness couldn’t be exterminated, even if you tried.

‘Okay,’ said Leslie. ‘Is that your way of saying that it doesn’t matter what we do?’

‘No, that’s *not* what I’m saying *at all*,’ Tockner responded irritably. ‘What I’m trying to say is that nature has to do the job itself. Real nature doesn’t need to be managed. Or to put it another way: an ecosystem is only healthy when it’s self-regulating, if it can absorb shocks, if the various species are in balance and there’s enough natural diversity. But as things stand now, we’re trying to conserve those areas with technological tricks.

‘So how can we restore their self-regulating capability? Even in environmental legislation there’s a zero-tolerance regime. Recovery has to be achieved with no margins for error, for experimentation, for unexpected outcomes.

‘That’s what’s wrong with CALFED. The problem is the people who run it, the bureaucrats. They think they have all the answers, but in reality they don’t know what they’re talking about. The government agencies that deal with the environment don’t have the right people. They’re a bunch of chicken shits – too wary, too scared something might go wrong. That halfhearted approach doesn’t work. We’ve tried it for the last 30 years. You mustn’t be afraid to try big projects. Don’t forget that we can learn from our failures too.’

‘So what do you think?’ Leslie asked Grad after Tockner had hopped on his racing bike and headed off in the direction of the campus.

‘I don’t know,’ said Grad. They had gotten some sandwiches, and he was absorbed in consuming his. A piece of mozzarella fell out of the bread. After only a few bites of his small custard bun, Leslie had pushed his plate aside. The meager amount of food on which Leslie appeared to function made Grad feel that his own body was a clumsy machine from a bygone age, a coal-driven engine, while Leslie’s sinewy body had already made the transition to hydrogen power. Or whatever would come next, once all the fossil fuels were used up, a moment predicted so many times already that he was almost looking forward to it.

‘He had a point,’ he went on. ‘Obviously, the current approach is just so much impressionistic fiddling. It leads to a comatose kind of nature, which we’re keeping alive by mechanical means. On the other hand, I was bothered by his contempt for anything to do with politics and bureaucracy. His hands seemed too clean to me. His proposals are so abstract that they can’t possibly fail.’

‘Yeah.’ Leslie pulled the laptop towards him. “‘Let nature regulate itself.’” Well, Rudi, the last time we tried that, a few million Chinese crabs took over the joint.’ He burst out laughing.

The next morning, a hastily planned field trip was on the program. At dinner a few nights before, Leslie had talked about the interviews they planned. Elisabeth had pointedly remarked that they had only spoken to bureaucrats in the capital and that they were writing about an area they had never been to.

‘Indeed,’ was Leslie’s amused response. Elisabeth was referring to the iron law of field research: always visit the places you write about. He told Grad about the development experts they had seen during their time in Africa. They would make reports for the IMF or the UN from their hotel rooms without ever venturing outside the capital. It was a question of good writing – that is to say, elegantly reproducing the prevailing opinions of the powers-that-be. There were very few people at the IMF or the UN who had the knowledge or inclination to

contradict the reports. Only the incompetent and the unlucky ever got into trouble. An Italian expert had written an alarmist report for the UN from his hotel room in Harare about the growing problem of deforestation in the Zimbabwean countryside. Deforestation was a problem everyone believed in, and consequently little evidence was needed to prove its existence – a few sentences about poverty-stricken Africans cutting down forests for their firewood was usually sufficient. Unfortunately for the Italian expert, a study on that very subject by three Americans came out at the same time as his own report. Using satellite photos they showed that the percentage of forested terrain had actually been increasing in large parts of Africa – including the Zimbabwean countryside. The Italian expert immediately wrote a critical article about the study in which he slammed the Americans for being statistics fetishists and accused them of serving capitalist interests that were seeking to downplay the seriousness of the global environmental crisis. In the aftermath of this conflict, he changed his specialty from deforestation to ‘local empowerment’. That was clearly more important than accurate statistics on deforestation. Without the involvement of local people you couldn’t achieve a thing – a truism so obvious that it required no evidence, certainly not anything so banal as satellite images.

‘It’s disgraceful,’ Elisabeth had said, returning to Leslie’s confession that they had not visited the Bay Delta. She didn’t sound indignant. It was simply a statement of fact that required no additional emphasis.

Shortly after that conversation, Leslie called a friend of his, a professor of geography who knew the Bay Delta well. The professor gave him the phone number of Jim and Sally Shelby, a couple who ran a farm on one of the hundreds of islands in the Delta. Their annual turnover was \$50 million, and they also found the time to do their part to promote environmental recovery.

Over the phone Sally Shelby had given them directions to Staten Island, a 15 square miles patch of land where their agro-business was located. They followed local roads across a grassy plain, parallel to the waters of the Suisun Marsh. After

they had passed Antioch, the road narrowed down to a single lane. In the shoulder were the tire tracks of cars passing each other.

They couldn't see any road signs. Sally's directions used landmarks like a boarded-up diner, a grain silo, a gas station and a drawbridge. They were soon the sole car in a landscape of green meadows, dikes and drainage ditches. The islands were connected by narrow metal bridges, held together by thousands of bolts that rumbled under their tires as they rode over them.

As the drive went on, Grad began to get the feeling that something wasn't quite right, as if they had missed a turn-off somewhere and were now going in the wrong direction. It took a while before he realized what it was: they were driving through a typical Dutch polder landscape. The peaty soil had sunk down so far that the islands were now several meters below the level of the canals and streams.

According to the directions they should have been nearing the last turnoff. An unpaved road sloped away from the dike, onto the island. The only sign that the road led somewhere was a silver mailbox with a red metal flag. There was no name on it.

As they drove down from the dike, they spotted a bungalow in the distance, surrounded by a circle of irrigated green. The rest of the island was light brown – bare, arid earth – surrounded by a dike. In the distance a group of Latinos sat on their knees next to wooden boxes, busy doing something with trowels. There were three pick-ups next to the house. Grad drove past them and parked in a corner where it seemed they would be least in the way.

Leslie rang the bell. Nobody came to the door. They walked around the house, but they saw no one there either. Just as they were about to return to the cool of the air-conditioned car, a sturdily built woman in a sweater and jeans appeared, a large portion of her well-tanned face covered by oversized sunglasses. 'Oh, you must be the researchers,' she said. It was a statement, not a question. 'I'll just go and ask Jim if he has time for you.'

Grad took off his jacket and stretched his arms. His pale, office worker's body seemed out of place in these surroundings, like a jellyfish washed up on the beach. They followed Sally into the house, and she left them in the cool living room. Leslie pointed to an outlet, and Grad plugged in his laptop.

A moment later Jim came into the room, dressed exactly the same as his wife. Only the sunglasses were different.

Leslie launched into his pitch. 'We've heard you're doing some innovative things with the wetlands around your dikes,' he concluded.

'That's right,' said Jim. Unexpectedly, he turned to Grad. 'So you're from Holland?'

'Yes.'

'You guys know all there is to know about dikes. Here, nobody has a clue.'

'Oh, I'm not so sure whether...'

'He's an expert,' Leslie interrupted. 'He's even published on the subject. Isn't that right?'

Grad nodded. Strictly speaking, he *had* published an article about dikes. And as Leslie well knew, the article was not really about dikes but about the political row that had ensued in the wake of a dike breach.

Sally came in with a tray carrying four glasses of lemonade.

The interview began with the questionnaire, but Jim didn't like the questions, and Leslie didn't like the answers. Within minutes the men seemed tired of each other.

'You don't understand,' Jim finally said. 'We're doing our best here to respect the environment, and all we get is a lot of crap from those bureaucrats in Sacramento.'

Leslie did not respond, unwilling to go down that particular road.

Grad looked up from the laptop. 'You mean you're being punished for restoring the wetlands?' It was the first time he had opened his mouth since the interview started.

Jim gave him a penetrating look and then turned to Leslie, ‘Why doesn’t he run the interview? That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to say.’

Leslie threw up his arms and shot Grad an accusatory look. ‘Fine. You do the interview.’

‘No, no, that’s not necessary.’ Grad felt trapped. He didn’t want to run any interviews.

Leslie had made this suggestion before – prior to an interview, rather than during it – but Grad had always declined the offer with various practical excuses. He had no idea what he was supposed to get out of such a conversation. Leslie, on the other hand, would root around in the respondents’ remarks as if he could smell a solution that no one had thought of yet.

The only thing Grad could smell was his own nervous sweat and occasionally the scent of truth that permeated the messy stories of their interviewees. His own rule of thumb was that anybody was right until proven otherwise. In reporting on a respondent’s position, Grad often made it sound better and more convincing than the respondent himself had managed to do. Ideas were like people. They might miss a bit here or a piece there, but that was no reason not to take care of them. The respondents had taken the time to talk to him. The least he could do was to keep a fair account of their ideas and, when necessary, ensure that everything added up in the end. He was a bookkeeper of personal truths.

The drawback of his approach was that there was always a surplus in the credit column at the end of the accounting period. Everyone was right. One party’s version of events frequently contradicted another’s. You could argue that those items canceled each other out, but even so, you always ended up with an oversupply that was impossible to offload somewhere else. There was simply an overproduction of truth in the world.

Jim explained again that his island would be under water if he didn’t reinforce the dikes. But because of the ecological value of the wetlands, there were strict rules that prevented them from doing so. ‘Wetlands that we restored ourselves, for crying out loud! On the island next to ours they just dumped a load of rocks

on the dike, and nobody ever bothers them. There's nothing worth protecting over there, so they don't need any permits. It's as simple as that.'

Grad sympathized with their story, but Leslie plainly did not. There was no hook in it. Complaining about bureaucrats wasn't new.

'Can't the dikes be reinforced some other way?' Leslie asked.

'Can you explain it to him?' said Jim to Grad. 'You Dutch know how it is. You can't make dikes higher without widening them.'

'Ha,' laughed Leslie. 'That exactly what they're doing in the Netherlands.' He had apparently remembered that point from Grad's article.

Jim looked shocked and turned to Grad in the hope that he would contradict this. It was the first time he looked at all vulnerable.

Grad made an apologetic gesture and said something about sheet piling being driven into dikes to protect the surrounding ecosystems.

Jim shook his head.

Two minutes later the interview was over.

'If you want,' said Sally, 'I can give you a tour of the island so you can see for yourselves.'

Leslie looked at his watch.

Sally's gaze wandered from Leslie to Grad.

'Sounds interesting,' said Grad.

The pick-up groaned its way up the dike. As soon as the car had reached the top, Sally stepped on the accelerator. The truck's suspension offered little protection from the large rocks and potholes in the road that ran along the dike. The three of them banged against each other on the front seat. Grad kept having to lean to one side to avoid the swinging rosary dangling from the rearview mirror.

At the far end of the island, Sally stopped the truck. They got out and were immediately sent into coughing fits by the cloud of dust that the car had thrown up and now caught up with them. Sally walked to the waterside of the dike. Grad

went over to her, ready to nod sympathetically at her story. When he glanced behind him, he saw Leslie heading in the other direction.

‘Look,’ said Sally, ‘that’s some of the shallow water habitat we restored.’ Grad, trying to see exactly where she was pointing, nodded sympathetically. About thirty feet from the dike he saw a few rocks and some bushes poking out of the water. Next to one of the rocks was a twig, and with a little imagination you could see it as the start of a tree or a bush. There were more reeds and grass at the foot of the dike than elsewhere. In the middle of the water there was a pole with a crooked, weather-beaten metal sign. ‘NO BOATS!’ it said in hand-painted lettering. ‘We don’t let any boats in. They disturb the fish,’ said Sally.

The dike on the other side of the water, the shore of one of the neighboring island, was covered by a layer of stones. Not so much as a blade of grass grew between the stones.

He turned around again to see what Leslie was doing. He was some distance away, with his back to the water. Grad followed the direction in which Leslie was looking, but saw nothing on the island that could explain his interest. There was no vegetation anywhere. The endless furrows in the tan earth were only interrupted by the occasional bird and the Latinos beside their crates. Shimmering heat waves rose up from the ground, rendering the scene even more abstract.

When Sally finished explaining about the fish and the fish eggs that liked shallow water, they got back in the car. Leslie came over from the other side, but said nothing. They drove on down the dike until they arrived at a large hole in the road.

Sally got out and walked to the edge of the hole. ‘Last year the dike almost collapsed. The whole island would have been under 20 feet of water,’ she said. At night the dike had started to leak. They would never have noticed if the dog hadn’t woken them up. ‘The dog knew,’ she said in awe. In the moonlight they saw that a chunk of the dike had crumbled away. They had to work like mad for hours to stop the rest of the dike from collapsing. Right before sunrise, the dog

jumped into the water. He was swept up in the current, and they never saw him again.

Sally fell silent. Grad didn't know what to say, and Leslie seemed lost in thought. 'That's why I get so mad when they tell us we can't reinforce those dikes.' With that, she turned abruptly and strode back to the car.

A short time later they arrived back at the bungalow. They thanked her and got in their own car. As they were leaving the island, Leslie said that Grad should be more careful during the interviews. 'You have to stay neutral. It's dangerous to get into conversations with the respondents.'

Grad did not respond. He had a headache, and the remark irked him.

'Our approach to this problem is totally wrong,' said Leslie. 'Everyone's preoccupied with the water and the endangered fish. In that case the dikes *are* a problem, a barrier to natural recovery. But no one looks at the natural environment *on* the island – the agro-ecosystem. The dikes are protecting that. In other words: we're looking at the wrong kind of nature.'

Grad looked at him in disbelief. 'We're looking at the wrong kind of nature.' The sentence echoed in his head. There were any number of criticisms he could have raised, and for a moment he was tempted to voice them. But he suppressed the urge. He had to admit it was an original thought. Once again, Leslie had found a way out of an impossible dilemma.

He stared out the window of the car. After a few minutes he asked how valuable the ecosystem on the island actually was.

'There's all kinds of research that shows that the biodiversity on agricultural lands is greater than that of many nature preserves,' Leslie declaimed. He had already thought of a source with which to back up his claim – an article in *Science*, the most prestigious scientific journal in the world. When he cited a study, it was rarely one in their own field.

The first town they reached consisted of an intersection, a parking lot and a few houses, with a signboard hanging from one of them. Grad parked their red city car between a pair of dusty four-wheel drives.

The decor of the small restaurant would have been more appropriate to a bar. A few small tables, a row of booths with leather upholstery and a counter, behind which was a blue neon beer sign and a cartwheel. They sat down in one of the booths. Grad had learned to ignore the menu; these kinds of places always served the same food. He ordered a bacon burger, apple pie, milk and coffee. It took a moment before the woman understood that the milk and the coffee were supposed to be served separately.

The arrival of the food interrupted their conversation about the interview. Leslie finished first. He rested his elbows on the table, folded his hands under his chin and stared at Grad for a while. The latter was only halfway through his bacon burger. It took longer with a knife and fork, but Grad preferred to keep his hands clean.

‘You know,’ Leslie said. ‘I don’t see any distinction between friendship and sex. I mean, I know you’re with Karina, and I don’t want to get between you two. I love Elisabeth too. But I don’t see why we can’t just have sex.’

Grad looked around the room as discreetly as possible, to see if the locals were listening in on their conversation. ‘I understand what you’re getting at,’ he said.

Leslie’s eyes remained fixed on him.

Sometimes it wasn’t enough merely to be the conscientious bookkeeper of people’s truths. Sometimes they tried to make you complicit in their truth, which could have unforeseeable consequences. He had to find a way to get out of this conversation. A small sacrifice.

‘Listen,’ said Grad quietly, his body stiffening in anticipation of what he was about to say. ‘Because of you, I’ve thought about sleeping with a man for the first time in my life.’

‘Really?’ Leslie looked momentarily stunned. ‘That’s all I ask, honey.’ He put a hand on Grad’s forearm. ‘Just think about it. It would mean so much to me.’

At home, after dinner, they made an outline of the report. When they had finished the table of contents, Leslie clinked his bottle of beer against Grad's. 'Cheers. Did you want to write the third part? Because it's about dikes, among other things. You seemed much more comfortable during that interview with the Shelbys.'

'Fine.'

'Great. I want to send the first part of the report to the Carnegie Foundation next Wednesday, to show them the progress we've made. Can you manage that?'

'Yeah.'

'Okay, guy, let me give you a hug.'

The momentary pressure of Leslie's body against his began to feel familiar. In the absence of any material threats, the heightened state of alert that had been in effect during their first hug had been relaxed.

'Sleep well.'

'You too.'

In the basement room he switched on the computer and went to a few of his favorite amateur-housewife sites. He was too tired to put much effort into it, and he fixed his gaze on the first serviceable photo – the camera was pointing downward at the upturned face of a kneeling woman, covered in the snot-like sperm of a man who was out of frame. She smiled at the camera, as if she had just played a clever trick on someone.

Rubbing his eyes, he erased the internet history. With a series of quiet clicks the computer carried out his command to shut down.