

A great American novel from a European point of view

A.F.Th. van der Heijden

Judgement by Shards

A.F.TH. VAN DER HEIJDEN's thick new novel *Het schervengericht* (Judgement by Shards), with its familiar yet strange and unsettling story, surprises the reader at every twist and turn. The action takes place within only a few months at the turn of 1977/1978, and the setting is limited to the Choreo prison in San Bernardino, California, U.S.A.

A famous movie director has to do time – a few months – for statutory rape. In order to survive, he has disguised himself, growing a heavy beard, entering the prison on platform shoes to camouflage his short stature, and taking on the name of Remo Woodehouse. Remo is locked in a small section with only one other prisoner, who says that his name is Scott Maddox.

This Scott Maddox – who is just as short as Remo – hides behind a mask that he cannot take off; his head has been swathed in bandages since the day that a lunatic set him on fire and his face had flamed like the head of a match. Scott and Remo are assigned to clean the halls and dirty cells of Choreo, and as they mop, they fence verbally with each other, their rapier-like mops creating a pattern of mazes on the granite floors. Two maze patterns emerge, one mirroring the other, as the men pry into the other's true identity and history. What emerges is that Remo had a beautiful wife Sharon who was viciously murdered several years previously while eight months pregnant. And Scott Maddox, who in the mirror calls himself Charlie, and who has malicious, Messianic qualities, considers himself a political prisoner. This is where the reader will recognise what Van der Heijden's story is based on: the gruesome murder in Beverly Hills on 9 August 1969 of Sharon Tate, wife of Roman Polanski, by members of the 'Family', Charles Manson's sect. The two main characters also discover the other's true self: one the director of light, the other the director of blood. Questions concerning the circumstances of the murder and why Scott Maddox's followers carried out this bizarre deed sweep the reader along through the double maze to the inevitable conclusion.

The novel's power doesn't lie in a narration of facts. Van der Heijden has not written literary non-fiction like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*. Rather, he subordinates facts to his fiction and his very personal obsessions and subject matter: man's true nature and his desire to escape time and identity.

Van der Heijden's sparkling metaphors, his eye for fascinating detail, and his power to forge a new, ingenious, and mythic story from the detail, makes *Judgement by Shards* breathtaking.



photo Tonio van der Heijden

A.F.Th. van der Heijden (b. 1951) initially studied psychology and philosophy in Nijmegen but turned to writing after moving to Amsterdam. His first two books appeared under the pseudonym Patrizio Canaponi: the short story collection *Een gondel in de Herengracht* (A Gondola in the Herengracht, 1978, Anton Wachter Prize, 1979) and the novel *De draaideur* (The Revolving Door, 1979). Van der Heijden then began publishing under his own name. Van der Heijden has won national fame with *The Toothless Time* (De tandeloze tijd), a brilliant seven-volume saga about Amsterdam in the seventies and eighties. He is regarded as one of the greatest literary authors in the Lowlands and has received many important Dutch honours.

A. F. Th. van der Heijden is unleashed, and to no small degree. Like Prometheus released from his rock, Van der Heijden has written, in grandiose and fascinating style, the latest voluminous part of his *Homo Duplex* novel cycle [...] It is certain that if he continues in this way, *Homo Duplex* will become a supreme masterpiece, unprecedented in the Netherlands.

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Querido
Singel 262
NL – 1016 AC Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 551 12 62
FAX: +31 20 639 19 68
E-MAIL: rights@querido.nl
WEBSITE: www.querido.nl

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Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Singel 464
NL – 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 620 62 61
FAX: +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL: office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE: www.nlpvf.nl

Sample Translation

Judgement by Shards

(Het Schervengericht)

by A.F.Th. van der Heijden

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2006)

Translated by Paul Vincent

[pp. 49-80]

Friday 20 January 1978

The Strip Cell

1

‘Little Remo, can you lend me twenty bucks?’

‘That’s more cash than I’ve got in my own cell, Scott.’

‘I’ve used up all my spare strings. I need tapes...’

‘You can have five dollars from my cleaning money. That’ll mean I’m splitting everything fifty-fifty with you.’

‘You’ve got money coming out of your ass, you sonofabitch...!’ With all the bandages it was hard to tell whether his fury was feigned. ‘Your producers bring it in by the bagful. I’ve got an unpaid bill of yours here... from the Spahn Family Hospital in Chatsworth. Obstetrics department. An invoice for fifteen hundred dollars for a Caesarean section. Payable immediately, or the teller at the collection department will start ticking.’

‘Now that’s your worst crime of all... not showing those fancy butchers of yours how to perform a Caesarean.’

‘It was outside their competence. War is war.’

‘Which brings me to the core of my indictment,’ said Remo. ‘The loneliest twenty minutes in the history of mankind.’

‘And now in plain American,’ said Maddox. ‘Choreo slang is OK too.’

‘Taking a life on the threshold of life.’

‘No problem. Provided you wipe your feet first.’

‘Completely uncorrupted. All its potential still there within a pristine membrane.’

‘The indictment, Little Remo, must be couched in comprehensible legal Chinese. Charlie knows that much from the time he conducted his own defence.’

‘Why...’

‘Why does a new born baby cry and someone who’s dying doesn’t?’

2

When Remo was led away by the guards to the disciplinary committee, Maddox hadn’t shouted anything after him. Perhaps his throat was too sore. It dawned on Remo that neither of them, despite their mutual threats, had yet publicly revealed their identity. Even when their conflict was at its height, and they scarcely knew where they were, in a prison in the red-light district of Hamburg, they had kept their pact.

Since Maddox had been the one attacked, and hadn’t even defended himself, only Remo was sentenced to solitary.

‘Another long weekend in the hole,’ said the chairman of the disciplinary committee, summing up. ‘Seventy-two hours strip cell, to cool off. And afterwards I don’t want to see you two mopping floors together again.’

3

The moment of truth took me by surprise after all. I witnessed a scene taking shape before my eyes that I had set in motion but had not foreseen.

For the second time in a fortnight I was assigned to take Remo to solitary confinement. Shackled hand and foot, unlike last time, he took short steps down the corridor between Carhartt and me. To back up our authority, our colleague Tremellen walked three metres behind us.

Halfway down the corridor we had to wait for our colleague Zalkus, escorting a chained Riot Gun, to open the barred gate. Riot Gun, I knew, had just finished a week in solitary for grabbing guard Tremellen full in the crotch – not an assault, just a gesture of contempt. Riot was deathly pale, which made the five blue tears

on his face stand out even more. As they waited he and Remo looked in opposite directions, but when they came alongside they looked briefly, penetratingly, at each other. It didn't escape me that The Gun raised his eyebrow above the row of three tears. Remo replied with a nod and a brief, horizontal gesture at navel height. Then they were past each other.

At the end of the corridor stairs left and right led down to the basement and the solitary cells. I took Remo by the arm, and was about to lead him to the right, as I had two weeks before.

'He's going to the strip cell,' said Carhartt.

'Ernie, give me a break,' I said, 'it's January.'

'Orders, Spiros. It's got under-floor heating. It's balmier than in May.'

As if we were expecting Remo to put up fierce resistance, which he did not, we each took him firmly by one arm, and led him down the left-hand steps.

It was the first time I had seen the strip cell from inside. Prison cells were always sparsely furnished, but this solitary cell was literally bare. No toilet, no sink, no bed – nothing. Only the familiar light bulb in its cage of wire and cobwebs, high up on the vaulted ceiling. Initially I overlooked the only sanitation, a hole on the floor. What there was, when I ventured further into the cell, was that strange sensation in my legs, as there used to be in my temple, where the foundations had subsided. The composite stone floor was not level. It stank.

While Ernie Carhartt guarded the prisoner, Tremellen fetched a sleeping mat and a horse blanket from the locker in the corridor. He had to stay at his post outside the door, so I took the folded bedding from him. As I was about to dump it in a corner, I realised that the floor sloped down very regularly from the walls to the exact centre of the cell, where at the lowest point there was a round hole in the stone. That was where the stench was rising from.

'It's like an old-fashioned Turkish toilet,' I said, 'the kind you still sometimes see in Paris cafés.'

'You're a Greek,' said Carhartt. 'Greeks can't stand anything Turkish.'

‘Here the whole cell is a toilet,’ said Remo. ‘Four walls surrounding an arsehole.’

‘Exactly,’ said Tremellen, in the doorway. ‘Anus to anus, that’s your whole punishment.’

‘An eye for an eye, an ass for an ass,’ said Carhartt. ‘That’ll teach you to assault your fellow-inmates.’

From around the opening dried tracks of filth stretched halfway up towards the walls. Closer to the hole they were still fresh and wet. Flies danced above them like ping-pong balls on the column of air in a shooting gallery.

‘They haven’t cleaned it out,’ I said.

‘Understandable,’ said Tremellen. ‘The Gun was in here till ten minutes ago.’

‘I can’t see any flushing system,’ said Remo.

‘There’s no running water at all,’ said Carhartt. ‘You get a carafe with meals.’

‘Does the light stay on day and night here too?’ asked Remo. Carhartt removed his shackles.

‘Round the clock,’ said Tremellen. ‘You have to remember it’s an experiment to see how long a bulb will last.’

‘Woodehouse,’ said Carhartt, ‘this is the strip cell. Do you know the house rules?’

‘Now I know what a strip cell is,’ said Remo.

‘Clothes off,’ said Carhartt.

Remo shook off his flip flops and overalls. Standing there in T-shirt and underpants and socks beneath the light fragmented by cobwebs and wire, he seemed even smaller than usual beside us large men.

‘Clothes off,’ said Carhartt.

‘Everything?’

‘Except for the underpants,’ said Tremellen. ‘No reason why a guard should be offended by the sight of you all day long.’

Remo took off his T-shirt and socks. Carhartt gathered up the clothes.

‘Look in the locker,’ I said to Tremellen, ‘and see if there are any Gideons.’

A moment later he handed me a Bible, which I placed on top of the blanket.

‘There was no Bible in my last solitary cell,’ said Remo.

‘No,’ said Tremellen, ‘and I’ll tell you why. Once a convict in a solitary cell with a tap let water run over his Bible till it became an offensive weapon as heavy as lead. The first guard who went in got that thing in the neck. Since then Bible studies have been confined to the strip cell.’

‘You’ve given me an idea,’ said Remo. ‘I’ll piss on it till I have my own secret weapon.’

I expected Tremellen to demand the book back, but he didn’t. The Choreo rules required a prisoner in solitary confinement to be watched till the door was closed. We backed out of the cell, watched with a pitying smile by Woodehouse in his underpants.

‘See you Monday,’ he said, raising his hand.

‘If you behave yourself,’ said Carhartt. ‘There’s such a thing as interest on your sentence.’

The door was as thick as that of a bank vault.

4

After the door closed a thunderous silence descended.

As in the previous solitary cell there was no window. There was, though, an air vent high up out of reach on the wall, the mesh of which was almost completely clogged with cobwebs and dead insects.

The under-floor heating ensured that the fetid smell remained sickly and sweet.

Remo sank down on his haunches against the wall. His bare feet could gain no grip on the smoothly sloping floor. Finally he eased himself onto his buttocks, but they slid out from under him too, leaving him hanging in an uncomfortable position against the wall. So, feeling a neck cramp coming on, he feasted his eyes on the only view afforded by his new accommodation: the steep-sided valley surrounding the excrement-smearred drain outlet.

Old bodily waste had dried white and greenish on the stone. Lime and gall. The imprints of burst foam bubbles were still visible in what once must have been streaks of vomit. He wondered whether it was in protest that the lonely detainee jettisoned his waste matter and juices randomly onto the floor.

Remo had hoped for a long weekend of constipation, so as not to have to crouch over the filthy hole, but no sooner had the guards left than his bowels started playing up. However far he placed his feet apart they were still on his predecessor's glutinous filth. Defecating into the reservoir beneath the hole released infinitely more stench into the cell than he produced himself.

'I don't see any toilet paper,' said Remo. 'Is the Bible meant for wiping my ass?'

5

His mouth and throat became parched. He was tormented by the absence of a tap, more than by thirst itself. He scanned the cell for a button. There was one, set unobtrusively into the door post. Don't ring unnecessarily. They weren't going to grind him down.

Remo remembered from *In Cold Blood* how Perry Smith, in his cell next to the sheriff's kitchen, had devised a method of unscrewing the bare bulb above his head. He pressed the bulb against the ceiling with a hard broom, and worked it loose with short jerks. If he needed slivers to cut his wrists, all he had to do was let the bulb drop.

The difference was that Remo did not have his broom with him here, and the bulb was protected by a wire cage. He aimed the Bible at a dark spot on the ceiling and practised so that when evening came and he wanted to sleep, he could smash the bulb to smithereens. The book kept falling open on its upward flight, and landed, its pages flapping noisily – which in this silence got on his nerves. He pulled the woollen thread from one hem of the blanket, and tied the Gideon shut. The book had a hard cover of scarlet simulated leather that left red stripes and right angles on the ceiling.

‘Though your sins be as scarlet...’ muttered Remo. ‘Isaiah, I think.’

He pulled the string loose and looked it up. *Is. 1:18*. He started leafing through and reading, and abandoned the idea of smashing the bulb. He still had forty-eight hours after today, and didn’t want to spend them in the dark.

The bulb in one of those woven steel cages must be at least 100 Watt. Through the steel mesh and cobwebs the light spun a welter of threads through the cell that made it difficult to read.

By now his thirst consisted of two parts thirst and five parts panic. His naked body was of course allowing more moisture to evaporate than when he was dressed. Shivering and sweating, he got up to press the button. A few minutes later the hatch in the door opened. Twelve inches beyond was another such flap, and the head of an unknown guard appeared in it.

‘Water.’ Remo forced out the word. His tongue, stiff from dehydration, refused to cooperate.

‘In an hour,’ said the man, ‘with your chow.’

It looked as if he was trying to punch Remo in the face, but he was just reaching for the inner hatch to close it.

6

The stench was so all-pervasive that not one mouthful he brought to his mouth smelled of food. So eating just a little turned his hunger into a nauseating fullness and made him feel that each pore was oozing a smell of excrement. He looked for a place to deposit his still full dish of food, and the moment he let go of it the light went off.

It must be a mistake. It would come back on for sure. Remo remained motionless, his arm still extended towards the food, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. The moment did not come. The dark that had descended on him acquired no nuances at all, because nowhere was there a slit or a crack through which light, however faint, could seep.

If the bulb had blown, he would surely have heard it in this total silence. The guards never turned off the light in late morning. There must be a power cut. Because a prison could not afford a power cut, there were emergency power units. They would be bound to move into action, and then this massive, terrifying darkness would dissolve at a click of the fingers.

The light remained off. If the main current had failed it would affect the alarm button too. Remo slid along with his back to the wall, a step at a time, towards the door. He pressed the button.

In this darkness which imposed its own rules, it seemed to take a very long time for the hatch to open. Just enough light entered to make the dark less impenetrable.

‘Stop all this ringing, Woodehouse.’ The voice of The Greek.

‘Mr Agraphiotis, it’s against the law to stick a prisoner in an unlit cell.’

‘Glad to hear you know the law so well, Woodehouse. If I recall, we left you in a well-lit cell.’

‘And then turned out the light.’

‘If a bulb blows, it’s not deliberate.’

‘To screw a new one in does require deliberate action.’

‘In the high security wing, Woodehouse, you had excellent lighting in your cell. At night you could turn out the light so you could get some sleep. You were determined to get into solitary. One of the rules for this part of the prison is: never replace a light bulb during a sentence. The ladder is the tricky part.’

‘What was the punishment again, Mr Agraphiotis? The glaring light on twenty-four hours a day... or the pitch blackness there is at the moment?’

‘They both work.’

‘I protest.’

‘Count yourself lucky, Woodehouse. If the bulb hadn’t blown, it would have been on all night. Now you can get a good night’s sleep. In case you’re frightened of the dark... there’s no bed for a man to hide under. And that’s the last time I want to hear the bell.’

Up to now The Greek had shown himself to be a reasonable guard. He wouldn't let any inmate he was responsible for sit in pitch darkness for days on end. Besides, it would be an illegal form of torture.

The light didn't come on. The next time he rang there was no response. Darkness enveloped him as if he was wading through treacle.

It was as if the darkness doubled the stench. Sun-drenched memories of his life with Sharon stood no chance in this darkness.

'You were told only to ring in an emergency.' Agraphiotis.

'The light's gone out,' said Remo.

'That can mean one of two things,' said The Greek.

'One: it's blown,' said Remo. 'Two: someone turned it off.'

'You work it out.'

'I can't do without light.'

'For people who destroy prison property, we have a cell where there's *nothing* to smash up.'

'What you mean is, bulbs can't blow here.'

7

But people had sources of light *within* themselves. Someone who closes his eyes against the glaring sun can enjoy a spectacular light show on the inside of his eyelids. The drunk with a hangover has only to blink to see silver sparks of light dancing around like fleas.

After just an hour in the dark, Remo had only to close his eyes to see colourful patches of colour combining into sad and cheerful images. Sometimes they came from memory; more often they were unfamiliar.

When Remo tried to relieve the pressure of silence on his eardrums by sticking his fingertips in his auditory canals and making massaging motions, sounds emerged. Very clearly he could hear things from another world than Choreo, at a different time. The sound of his home-made skis on a snowy mountainside during the war.

Remo was sitting with his bare back against the cell wall, which was cooler than the composite on which his feet were braced to avoid sliding. As he blinked he picked up snapshots of his house on Cielo Drive.

Someone was working in the garden, so it must be a Friday. Not a Friday like now, in January – a summer Friday.

For half an hour, in the silence that at times whooshed, at others boomed in solitary cell 3B, Remo heard nothing but noises from the direct vicinity of Cielo Drive 10050. The sound of hoeing in dry ground. The swish and clip of shears in the lush branches of an ornamental hedge. The gardener had brought his assistant along. He could not actually see the two gardeners, though he could hear their voices.

‘... leaves in the swimming pool, Mike. There’s a net in the garage.’

‘What if I fall in head first, Max? I can’t swim.’

‘If I hear a splash, I’ll be right there.’

‘Hoping it’ll be the lady of the house.’

‘I don’t know if she’s still swimming in her condition.’

‘The baby’s swimming in her.’

Their voices were as present (Max had dentures), as their physical appearance was absent. Remo had seen Max and Mike often enough: they always came on Fridays. Today, in the blood-filtered light, they were nothing but voice and sound. Nasal words, the scrape of tools.

A window opened. The fastening rubbed along the windowsill.

‘Max?’ Sharon’s voice, very close – around him, it seemed. ‘Don’t forget the garden sprinkler.’

‘Sure, ma’am. What’s wrong with it?’

‘The revolving mechanism, or whatever it’s called.’

‘The water jet, we call it. We’ll fix it, ma’am.’

Sharon closed the window again, and the red light behind Remo’s eyelids immediately dimmed.

The sounds from the garden, the voices of the gardeners, all sounded much more muffled.

‘Darling little Paul...’

Sharon turned to him, Remo. She called him, Remo, ‘Paul’. How could she be so sure she was expecting a boy? If it turned out to be a girl, she would be called Doris, after her mother. She never addressed the baby as Doris. It was always Paul – after her father, the colonel.

‘I really want to see you, Paul. I hope you come soon.’

Remo really wanted to see her too – through his own eyes, or through Paul’s eyes if need be. The way she was now she had no face. She was nothing but a warm enclosing presence, with a great beating heart some way above his feet. It was nice feeling the beating of the heart, so much slower than his, tingling through the soles of his feet.

Eventually the emerging, overlapping images disappeared to be replaced by a more stable light that slowly changed colour and sometimes dissolved into a multi-coloured teeming mass.

Remo discovered that he could manipulate the lightshow on his retina by exerting a variable pressure with his fingertips on his closed eyelids. He could feel the warmth of the California morning sun on his skin, but not directly – through an encapsulating membrane that turned the light pink. Slowly he drummed his fingertips on his eyelids, and the light surrounding him was marbled with dancing wavelets.

8

Late morning, moving into early afternoon. Sharon was lying, almost flat, on a sunbed by the pool. Remo was now almost horizontal inside her, his feet in the direction of her head. The glare of the sun in the blue water of the pool did something to the dim pinkish light within; it became less dim. He he’d heard her complaining a lot about the heatwave of the past few days. She was still lying in the full sun, but it would climb higher and then she would move into the shade.

‘So early, and the sun’s already burning,’ said Sharon.

‘I’ll move the parasol.’ Voytek’s voice. The scraping of a concrete base being dragged along, ribs groaning as they stretched. The flapping of a cover opening. The click of the sliding mechanism. ‘Milady.’

‘Thanks, Tek.’

The dominant colour in the stripes of the parasol must be green, because Paul was now lying in a light that reminded him of a trip to the woods with his mother.

‘With this harsh light it’s better for the baby too,’ said Sharon, ‘if I stay in the shade.’

‘A little grub like that is totally blind,’ said Voytek.

‘I’m well into my ninth month, Tek. The baby can see.’

‘What’s to see in there?’

‘I can feel when the baby reacts to a sudden change in light. Because this’ – she rubbed her bulging abdomen – ‘is now its eyeball, with which it absorbs the sunlight.’

True words, Mummy. But Paul also registered more subtle shifts in the way the light fell.

9

Because of the crackling in his eardrums, as if his ears were full of soap, the cell was full of sounds, which he absorbed deeply. If in someone born blind acoustic perception took on visual form, what was it like for the foetus at the verge of birth? When he heard voices and sounds Paul did not see human beings in front of him, but something like their actions, which had become vaguely visible. Registrations of body heat – or something.

Paul could distinguish the various cars from the fleet at 10050 Cielo Drive better and better. The Pontiac drove into the parking lot earlier than on other days. It was Abigail, returning from work in town. A car door clunked. A little later came the sound of her steps on the path. She walked round the house to the

swimming pool. Sharon's little dog Proxy ran, barking, to meet her. Abigail briefly kneeled by the bitch terrier, and talked to her as if to a baby.

'Tired, Gibby?'

'I took the afternoon off,' said Abigail. She kissed the sleeping Voytek. 'The week was hard enough as it was. Heat waves like this make clients play up.'

Gibby had only just got back from work and already she was squabbling with Voytek again. Paul didn't know what to make of Voytek. He could be very charming to Sharon, but when he'd been drinking or was on drugs, his voice grew loud and he could be very offensive, especially to his girlfriend. One evening, when Voytek had been on all sorts of stuff, he saw a pig's head in the fireplace. He tried to capture the image with his camera, since the others, Sharon and Gibby, saw nothing but dancing flames. Obviously the chemicals used for developing the photo were less powerful than those that had conjured up the pig's head, because a few days later the women were given a photo with nothing on it but the fire in the grate.

'Nice try, Voytek,' said Gibby.

10

Paul had heard his parents calculating out loud in London and later over the phone. Mummy's last period had started on 11 November 1969, so her full term was reckoned to be 18 August 1969. Since they were sure that their child had been conceived on Saturday 18 November 1968, they'd worked out for themselves that she should have reached the full term of 266 days in the weekend of 9-10 August 1969.

It was difficult for her to toss and turn in the thirty-eighth week of her pregnancy, but even so Paul noticed that his mother was sleeping badly. The heatwave of the last few days didn't improve things.

'It's getting worse and worse,' she said. 'I won't get a wink of sleep tonight.'

'It'll break tonight,' said Voytek. 'I can feel it.'

‘He’s talking bullshit,’ said Gibby. ‘He’s no good as a scriptwriter, so now he’s trying his luck as a weatherman.’

‘I’m going to lie down for an hour or two,’ said Sharon, ‘I can’t bear the thought of going through labour when I’m overtired.’

She got Gibby and Voytek to pull her out of the deckchair, but had to sit on the edge, waiting for a dizzy spell to pass. Before lying down on the bed, she went into the nursery.

‘Doris or Paul, this is where you’ll sleep.’

Paul had already detected the smell of paint.

‘Don’t think, Doris, you’ll have to lie on the floor. The cot, Paul, is on top of the wardrobe in Mummy and Daddy’s bedroom. It would have got in the way of the painters. Tomorrow Voytek will put it in its place. Mrs Chapman will take care of the canopy. When you wake, and look up, you’ll see lots of angels with trumpets.’

Today for the first time Mummy had not made any preparations. Paul noticed from her efforts that her hands had taken over from her mind. It was an urge, an instinct, as with birds. Now the nest was ready. Because she couldn’t quite believe it herself, she rechecked all the shelves in the wardrobe with requisites for mother and child.

The doctor and the midwife still had to decide whether it mightn’t be better to have the baby in hospital. If it was at home, which she’d prefer, she’d assembled all that was needed. In the cupboard on the left was everything required for the mother. Cellulose underblankets, double-stitched cotton bottom sheets, a rubber sheet, packs of obstetric bandages and ordinary sanitary towels, plastic bags of zigzag cotton wool, bed raisers, disinfectant soap, toilet soap, bottles of Dettol, lysoform and surgical spirit, sterile absorbent gauze, gauze 10/10 and 16/16...

Sharon read all of this aloud from her paper, and Paul enjoyed the long poem that heralded his appearance on earth.

‘Two empty jam jars for thermometers and tweezers... yes. Bowl forty-five centimetres across... there. Litre measure... OK. Bedpan... remembered that.’

Everything for the baby was in the chest-of-drawers on the right against the wall. Blankets, sheets, flannelette underblankets, rubber blanket, dozens of nappies (gauze, moss stitched and flannel), sweaters, baby tops, plastic pants, navel bandages, bibs, baby oil, baby soap, baby ointment, safety pins, and here too 16/16 sterile absorbent gauze. On top of the chest-of-drawers: dressing cushion and baby bath. It was all there.

‘Navel clamp... yes. Packet of Dextropur powder... not there.’ She marked it. ‘Hot water battle covers... there. Oh, that reminds me, I must have the hot water bottles checked for leaks.’

11

It had been weeks since Paul had heard his father’s voice with full clarity, back in London. Since Sharon, with Paul in her tummy and Proxy on her arm, had said goodbye to her husband before the boat left, his voice had been audible only as an ethereal and tinny sound from the telephone earpiece. His parents called each other a lot, sometimes several times a day. Occasionally Mummy pressed the handset to her tummy, and then Daddy talked to him. Paul was glad he was going to be a boy, as they couldn’t agree on a girl’s name.

‘Hallo there, Paul or Wanda... Daddy’s soon coming back across the big pond to be with you and Mummy. I hope I’ll soon be holding you in my arms. Kick up a storm – that’ll make Mummy less lonely. OK, bye Wanda, Paul, Daddy has to get back to the filmscript. It’s about dolphins. They can talk. Listen.’

He imitated the cheerful gabbling of a dolphin, ending in an underwater kiss, and he was gone again.

That Friday Sharon started crying the moment she dialled the London number.

‘Sharon, you’re crying.’

‘I feel alone.’

‘And Gibby and Voytek...’

‘Yes, they’re here, and I feel alone. Abandoned. Oh darling, it’s so hot here. And that squabbling between the two of them... I can’t stand it any more. I don’t

want them to be around when it's time for me to have my baby. I want you to be here to hold my hand.'

'I'm coming. I'll be right there. I'll get a plane tomorrow.'

'And what about the script?'

'I'll drop the ending.'

'Don't forget your visa, will you?'

'I'll drop by the consulate *right away*.'

'Wonderful to have you with me so soon.'

12

When Sharon bent down, the elastic of her bikini pants cut into the bottom of her abdomen. Paul felt as if he were being pushed upwards.

Paul didn't notice any sign of her getting changed. This meant that Sharon lay down in her bikini on top of the covers, which consisted of nothing more than a sheet. However dimly, he could make out the shaded pattern of the blind slats across her. She was lying on her back. He felt the gentle pressure of her folded hands. The draught that blew over her and helped the sweat to cool felt as refreshing inside her too. Gibby's and Voytek's squabbling by the pool penetrated the bedroom in half-audible snatches.

'... pills, you've got to stop them.'

'You're pretty fond of them yourself.'

'I do it for you, Tek.'

'Such a family thing, that spirit of sacrifice. They drink coffee to make it easier for the customer.'

'... getting addicted.'

What Remo could smell was not the asshole aperture in the floor, but his own waste that was being lovingly absorbed by the placenta before being disposed of. It was the smell of intimacy with Sharon, to which in the last few weeks, since he had been sensitive to smell, he had become attached.

Paul knew that his mother had slept for only a short time, half an hour at most, and then she'd jerked convulsively with prickly dreams. Once she had struggled towards the edge of the bed, and sat up, the sweat running down between her breasts and from the back of her knees.

Because swimming was no longer possible she took a lukewarm shower in her bikini. As she stepped onto the tiled area round the pool, the midday sun struck her so fiercely that Paul automatically started blinking. You could smell that more chlorine had been added to the water.

'Keep walking upright,' said Gibby.

'I'm doing my best.' With one hand high up her back Sharon waddled, rotating her pelvis, over to the sunbed. Bending her knee briefly she snatched her towel off the canvas.

'Why are you making a big deal of drying yourself?' said Gibby. 'Just let yourself drip dry.'

'I'm too scared the waters will break and I won't notice the difference. Amniotic fluid is just as transparent as water.'

'If they break, you'll smell the difference. Amniotic fluid has a sweetish smell.'

'What if I think I need to go to the loo and amniotic fluid comes...'

'There's a difference in colour.'

'My pee's often been colourless recently too. I easily catch cold in my bladder... even now, in this hot weather.'

'You can't hold back your waters.'

'With a cold in the bladder you can't hold back much either.'

'You know those glass globes you have to shake to make it snow? You've got those white flakes in amniotic fluid.'

'That's a new one to me.'

'If you've lain in the bath too long, your skin wrinkles. What do you do?'

'I rub in a lotion.'

‘A baby’s skin is protected with a layer of white ointment against the amniotic fluid in your abdomen. Whatever comes off is found in the amniotic fluid. No mistaking it.’

Sharon sank to her knees, and let herself roll onto the sunbed.

‘You’re the baby’s good fairy, Gibby. One with a snow globe. In the middle of a California heatwave.’

Paul was nearly half a metre in length at full stretch and weighed over three kilos – net. However, try as he might, he could not jack up the womb any further. He was fully developed, but he had not informed the placenta, via the ‘secret hormone’ the doctor talked about, that he was ready to be born. Any moment now he could send off his coded message. Something, he did not know what, was still holding him back.

‘Do you know, Gibby,’ said Sharon, ‘I think the head has already engaged. I feel – how can I put it? – less constricted. I’m breathing more easily, and my tummy no longer feels full after two mouthfuls.’

‘I hope so for your sake. Sometimes the head doesn’t engage until labour starts.’

‘Yes, in women who’ve already given birth. Not with me. God, Gibby, I feel as if I’m squeezing a football between my legs. I reckon it’s descended five centimetres.’

‘At least that means your pelvis is not too narrow.’

‘And the baby can’t be facing the wrong way.’

‘Everything perfect so far.’

‘Now all we need is a father.’

‘Don’t be so gloomy, Sharon. He’s coming on Monday. Tuesday at the latest.’

‘Gibby, my gut feeling says the baby will be here by then.’

‘There’s got to be a full moon first.’ The sleepy voice of Voytek, who was just waking up on his lounger.

‘Yes, that’s how you were born,’ said Gibby, ‘in the backwoods of Poland. More’s the pity.’

Sharon laughed. Paul knew how tiring she found their constant squabbling.

‘I don’t believe in full moons,’ she said. ‘But I do believe in lightning. If Tek is right and there’s a thunderstorm tonight, I wouldn’t be so sure. There’s a midwife in every bolt of lightning, I once heard.’

‘Sharon, try thinking about something else,’ said Gibby. ‘You’re focused too much inside. Come on, the world is bigger than a placenta.’

‘The baby can’t show himself yet. He has a right to my dreams.’

‘In Poland I knew a woman with lots of children,’ said Voytek. ‘At each birth she brought the contractions on in wave after wave of orgasms.’

‘Funny, isn’t it,’ said Gibby, ‘how most midwives’ tales originate from men.’

‘Listen, Gibby.’ Sharon whispered, perhaps to exclude Voytek. ‘If the contractions start, and Mr Romance isn’t back yet, I want to have the baby in hospital. Under all three telephones... living room, kitchen, bedroom... there are notes with the numbers of the doctor, the midwife and the hospital. You know the London number. If I can’t do it myself, you can ring round. OK?’

‘I suggest we leave our bedroom doors open at night.’

‘This house is out of the way. But I’ve worked out that I can make it to the hospital in half an hour, even if an ambulance has to be called first.’

‘I’ll take you, if necessary.’

‘Check on the phone first.’

‘Right.’

‘I hope to God, Gibby, that I don’t end up going into labour at the height of this heatwave.’

It wouldn’t be Paul’s doing. He could wait for a bit till the mercury dropped, if Sharon asked that of him. If he was troubled by the heat it was through her. No shortage of liquid. Because so much sweat was evaporating from the large surface area she now represented, she was drinking lots of fruit juice.

‘Freshly-squeezed oranges to assuage the contractions.’

‘Shall I do the front door before I go?’ That was Mrs Chapman.

‘Again?’ asked Sharon.

‘Oh, those wretched dogs... they keep putting their paws against the doors. Mud everywhere.’

‘Do the windows as well then, Winny. They’re covered in fingerprints from the painters.’

‘It’s that nasty putty. I’ll make up some extra-strong suds.’

In the darkness which Remo had never suspected could occur in such an unadulterated form on earth, he made out a repetitive noise that sent shivers over his naked body. It was Mrs Chapman, their cleaner in Cielo Drive, chammying the front door with stiff, squeaking strokes. One by one the muddy prints that the dogs’ paws had left on the woodwork at the bottom of the door disappeared, until the paint was spotlessly white, ready to receive new marks in mud or blood.

Mrs Chapman was singing ‘Yellow Basket’ as an accompaniment to her rhythmic creaking strokes of the chamois leather with which she cleaned the windows of the open doors to the swimming pool – so thoroughly that it looked as if she were hunting for invisible finger prints too.

There was a knock on the inner hatch. Remo climbed up to it along the wall, since that was what this disoriented groping was like: climbing. He yanked it open: no light from the corridor. The outer hatch had already been closed. The smell of bread indicated the presence of a meal. Remo pulled the eating tray towards him and a bowl of hot broth spilled all over him. No one heard his cry of pain. The tray clattered to the floor. His first thought was to grab the blanket and wipe it off. He dashed first to the wrong corner, and by the time he got hold of the blanket the broth was dripping cold and greasy from his body and the burning had penetrated his skin once and for all.

15

The three meals had given Remo an extremely vague chronology of the day, but he had the idea that he could follow the passing of the hours almost minute by

minute, as on a luminous clock. He could have indicated at precisely what time Winny Chapman and the gardeners had left, and when the trunks were delivered. As the day wore on, the ticking of the clock became increasingly insistent: there was no escaping it.

‘Sorry, ma’am, the garden sprinkler can’t be fixed.’

Max’s voice, complete with whistling dentures. ‘I can get hold of one for you very cheap, ma’am. Five dollars and it’ll last forever.’

‘Come in the house with me, Max. We’ll settle up and I’ll give you an extra five dollars.’

‘Oh no, ma’am. My shoes have got earth all over them. Mrs Chapman would kill me.’

‘Wait here. I’ll get the money.’

The places where the broth had landed on his body burned and stung. Remo hoped they would not turn into open sores, as Scott Maddox’s had done. The broth must have lost its most dangerous heat on its way from kitchen to cell, so Remo assumed that the stuff had felt hotter on his bare skin than it actually was. He was too proud to ring for ointment to put on the burns.

Mrs Chapman, having changed from cleaning clothes into a suit with a lace collar, came to say goodbye at the pool. Max and Mike were going to give her a lift to the bus stop.

‘Same time tomorrow, Winny?’

‘Eight o’clock, ma’am. You don’t have to get up. I know what needs to be done.’

16

‘How’s Mr Romance in London?’ asked Gibby.

‘That script’s driving him nuts. The book was no good to start with. He’ll try to get a plane tomorrow and be home by evening.’

‘His visa’s expired, hasn’t it?’

‘He’s going to try to get a new one first thing tomorrow.’

‘If he phones,’ said Voytek, ‘tell him to bring the script. I’ll finish it for him.’

‘After a pill and a smoke and a glass of wine,’ said Gibby, ‘you always get cocky. I’ve never seen anyone work so zealously... writing with smoke in the air.’

‘You coffee-planters are still living on the profits of slavery. All your family has to do is check the balance of blood money at the bank.’

‘If that’s the case, you’re a gigolo with blood on his hands.’

Paul could feel his mother’s despair mounting at all this sniping. She was saved by the bell.

‘I’ll go.’

‘Sharon scrambled laboriously to her feet and staggered dizzily to the intercom by the front door.

‘Hello?’

‘The cabin trunks you ordered,’ said a man’s voice. The intercom hissed and crackled.

‘To the right of the gate, in the bushes, there’s a button.’

Sharon opened the front door. From a slight tightening of the skin of her abdomen Paul could feel that she was leaning with her back against the doorpost. The delivery man came up the garden path pulling the trunks with their rattling wheels behind him.

‘Just put them in the living room. Right around the corner.’

‘Sign here for receipt.’

‘They’re not for me. I think the people staying with me...’

‘Just a signature, ma’am, that’ll do. That covers me.’

The delivery man folded the piece of paper, and left. Sharon went into the living room, complaining that the big trunks were in the way.

‘The trunks have come,’ she said, back at the pool. ‘I signed for receipt. Just put them in your bedroom, will you, Tex? They’re rather in the way.’

‘It’s too hot for me right now.’

‘Lazy swine,’ said Gibby. ‘I’ll do it.’

She came right back. ‘The delivery man has left his glasses behind.’

‘He wasn’t wearing glasses,’ said Sharon.

‘Perhaps he had them in his hand and put them on one of the trunks.’

‘I’ll call the company in a while.’

‘Why,’ asked Voytek, ‘did you order trunks, Sharon? You two are staying here, aren’t you, with the baby and everything?’

‘I thought *you* had rented trunks,’ said Sharon. ‘Because of your move.’

‘Move,’ said Voytek.

‘Yes, you were going to... I did ask you after all...’

‘When we met you off the *Queen Elizabeth*, you asked us to stay till... the master of the house returned. Or else till the baby arrives.’

‘Yes, but after that... Surely we’d agreed you were going to find a place of your own again.’

‘I’m starting to get the picture. You ordered those trunks to help speed our departure.’

‘I didn’t order any trunks, Tek,’ said Sharon. ‘Not to rent. Not to buy. Not to lend out.’

‘I get the message,’ said Voytek.

‘Tek,’ said Gibby, ‘we promised to leave as soon...’

‘Then I must have been stoned.’

‘As always,’ said Gibby. ‘We’ve sponged for long enough.’

‘We’re leaving today,’ said Voytek, ‘with our own trunks.’

‘Please don’t go,’ said Sharon. ‘Not now.’

‘I’m not staying a minute longer,’ said Voytek. ‘I know when I’m not wanted.’

‘Let’s at least wait for the call from London,’ said Sharon.

‘Hospitality that depends on a phone call,’ said Voytek, ‘isn’t hospitality. I’m a Pole.’

‘Beat it then,’ said Gibby. ‘I’m staying with Sharon for as long as she needs me.’

‘Meanwhile,’ said Sharon, ‘we still don’t know who ordered those blue cabin trunks and who they’re meant for.’

‘They must have got the wrong address.’

‘When I call about those glasses,’ said Sharon, ‘I’ll ask them to check their records.’

‘You’ve got a copy of the delivery note, haven’t you?’ asked Gibby.

‘I forgot,’ said Sharon. ‘It’s the heat.’

‘So you haven’t got a telephone number,’ said Voytek.

‘Yellow pages,’ said Gibby. She fetched the phone book, and started leafing through it. ‘Trunk rental... trunk sales... second-hand too... There are scores and scores of them. Impossible.’

She shut the book.

‘Are you sure they’re *empty* trunks, Sharon?’ asked Voytek.

‘Who’d send us full ones without telling us?’

‘Wasn’t Kosinski coming over from New York?’

‘Jerzy’s been invited to some top-secret birthday party. It seems a bit much for him to send his luggage ten days in advance. The toothpaste’ll go hard in its tube.’

‘Kosinski is very superstitious.’

‘So superstitious that he forwards *empty* trunks in advance?’

‘I’ve known odder things than that with that guy.’

‘Yes,’ said Gibby, ‘like when he introduced us in New York, for instance. That must be the oddest thing he ever did. I think of it every day.’

‘The ground Jewish coffee bean and the obsessive Polish sponger,’ said Voytek. ‘Perhaps Jerzy was stuck for an idea for a novel.’

Gibby began to cry. The telephone rang in the bedroom.

‘Stop this *right* now, you two,’ said Sharon, getting up from the sunbed even more laboriously than before. As his mother swayed towards her bedroom, Paul felt pleasantly rocked.

‘The consulate couldn’t do me a visa today. They close early on Fridays. That stupid visa...’

‘Promise me, darling, that you won’t have a late night tonight, so that first thing tomorrow...’

‘It’s shut on Saturdays too. I can’t go before Monday.’

‘From where I’m lying, I can see the cot on top of the wardrobe.’

‘I’ll be with you on Monday. Tuesday at the latest.’

‘I hope you’ll be in time for Tek and Gibby’s funeral. They’re beating the hell out of each other.’

‘When I get back I’ll help them find a place of their own.’

‘Make that two.’

‘How’s the nursery?’

‘The carpenter finished off this morning. Now we just need to get rid of the paint fumes. Mrs Chapman and Voytek are going to put the cot in its place tomorrow.’

‘Won’t Voytek get tired?’

‘It’s really bugging me. He didn’t even bother to put the cabin trunks away.’

‘Did I miss something?’

‘Don’t play stupid, Mr Romance. You had two cabin trunks delivered here this afternoon, as a sign that...’

Compared with Gibby Sharon’s weeping was restrained. The stray cat, Streaky, had climbed onto the bed, and lay purring on Sharon’s tummy. To Paul, in the sounding board below, it resonated like a judgement.

‘Hold on. I haven’t packed my own bags yet.’

‘Two blue cabin trunks were delivered this afternoon. Empty. Not new. I got so scared.’

‘Scared... of a couple of empty trunks?’

‘I thought they’d been sent by you. To say you were never coming home again.’

‘I’ll be home at the beginning of next week. With bulging suitcases. And I’ll be staying.’

‘Promise?’

‘If you promise to stay out of the sun. Hold your wrists regularly under the cold tap. I’m worried about that heatwave.’

It made Paul uneasy that those cabin trunks just stayed there in the doorway. Well-packed, threatening emptiness.

‘A stray cat has shown up. I give it milk from a pipette. It’s still a bit timid, but it keeps coming back. I call it Streaky, because it’s got such lovely light and dark grey stripes. It’s got white paws.’

18

The burn marks on Remo’s skin ran in a path from the hair on his chest via his belly and genitals down his left leg to his ankle. The pain got worse by the hour. The only way of fighting it was to use it as fuel for his visions. The result was a series of lucid hallucinations, in which he identified, in flashes, with his unborn son.

‘Tek, while it’s still possible,’ said Sharon. ‘A photo of the ripe fruit, just before it falls from the branch.’

‘House in the background?’

‘The hills, the ocean.’

‘Belly with view. Right.’

The click of the camera made Paul feel properly portrayed for the first time, still in disguise.

There was something obscene about being one flesh like this with the son he had never been able to hold in his arms, not even dead.

Remo could get no closer than this to Sharon, via their son in her final hours. In the moments when he didn’t merge completely with what he conjured up in the dark, Remo was immensely grateful to The Greek for throwing him in the cell. It was like waking from one of those rare dreams, which in totally insane images

say *everything* there is to say about a human life. When you woke you felt the pressure of an arm still in your neck. The aftertaste remaining on your tongue was as bitter as it was sweet.

This, without sleep, was the reality of a dream, perceived without senses. An excess of undiluted darkness, and reality found a way in all by itself – if only through the explosions of light that occurred when the prisoner closed his eyes against the solid darkness.

Remo did not sleep, but groping around him he felt the capricious living rubber of a womb wall. He hung with his head down; that felt like the best conceivable position. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the light had become weaker. The sun must already have sunk behind the hills.

‘The sun’s gone down,’ said Gibby, ‘but I don’t notice any change in the weather.’

‘Just you wait and see,’ said Voytek. ‘It’ll cool off tonight.’

The three of them stayed by the pool waiting for it to get cooler.

‘Jay was going to drop by tonight,’ said Sharon.

Someone mentioned the time (‘nearly eight’), and soon after, on the other side of the pool, the door to the guest quarters opened. Out came the young caretaker, William Garretson, who was also employed by the owner, Altobelli, to look after his dogs. They poked their heads out, barking, but Garretson pushed them back, and shut the door without locking it. He was obviously about to walk round the house, when Sharon called out to him.

‘Billy...! Have you got a moment?’

Shortly afterwards he walked through a puddle of water from the pool.

‘Ma’am?’

‘Were you expecting a consignment of empty cabin trunks?’

‘Not me, ma’am.’

‘Altobelli perhaps?’

‘Not that I know of, ma’am.’

‘Are you going out?’

‘Just to do some shopping on the Strip, I’ve got some letters to write.’

‘Have a nice evening, Billy.’

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

19

Sharon had already asked a few times if anyone wanted a bite to eat, but no one had any appetite in this smothering heat. A sea breeze got up, but it had to push so much heat ahead of it that none of those by the pool noticed. Except for Paul, that is, who felt a slight cooling in his mother’s body before she felt it herself.

The hairdresser’s Porsche was not part of the fleet at 10050 Cielo Drive, but the car drove into the parking lot so often that Paul recognised it at once.

‘That’ll be Jay,’ said Gibby.

They listened. Altobelli’s dogs barked.

‘I don’t hear any door slam,’ said Sharon.

‘Listen for the click of the ashtray,’ said Voytek. ‘Jay always finishes his joint in the car first.’

Suddenly he was there, looming up out of the darkness of the garden, since Voytek asked in sarcastically: ‘Say, Jay, did you use this address to have cabin trunks delivered?’

‘Yes,’ said Sharon, ‘were you going to take off on the quiet, without the neighbours noticing?’

‘Creditors, no doubt,’ said Voytek.

‘You guys have given me an idea,’ said Jay.

Gibby poured him a gin and tonic, with lots of ice.

‘The cubes melt while you watch,’ she said, putting the tongs back in the bucket.

‘Not for much longer,’ said Voytek. He put his hand in the air. ‘Here’s the cooling breeze they promised.’

All but Sharon got up to hold their sweaty faces in the breeze as much as possible.

‘It won’t last,’ said Jay, who was the first to sit down again.

Far below was the hum of the city, still unaware of any sea breeze, moving as little as possible in the clammy heat. By the pool the voices, which had found a sounding board in the rippling water surface, rang out more clearly and more cheerfully than before.

‘...big party for his birthday. He knows nothing about it yet, so keep quiet.’

‘I expect I’ll be allowed to act as bouncer,’ said Voytek, ‘just like last time.’

‘My own brave Mr Romance gave a good account of himself too,’ said Sharon.

‘That’s true,’ said Voytek. ‘The two of us threw out three dealers from the Strip. No trouble.’

‘I’m not the macho type,’ said Jay.

‘Next time,’ said Voytek, ‘we’ll hold them down for you, while you mess up their hair with your scissors.’

By now it was easy to hear how drink and other substances had coalesced in his tongue muscles.

On his way to the summer house Garretson stopped for a moment by the pool.

‘Did you walk all the way from the strip, Billy?’ asked Sharon.

‘I managed to thumb a ride in a pick-up. I’d have preferred a lift in Mr Sebring’s Porsche.’

‘I saw you hitch-hiking,’ said Jay. ‘I didn’t recognise you.’

Altobelli’s dogs barked.

‘The weather’s changing,’ said the caretaker. ‘The Strip was like an oven, but when I got out of the pick-up here, I felt cool air coming from the ocean. I’m going to take Piper and Virgil for a walk.’

The night was moonless around him. Not only was the moon new, but there were no stars either. After the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79 Pliny the Younger had written about a similar darkness: ‘...here it was night, no, more than night.’

In a few days, when he got out of here, Remo knew how he would film the tragedy of Pompeii. It would be a largely monochrome movie: in black.

Though they’d confiscated his wristwatch again, he felt he knew the time all through that Friday afternoon and evening: exactly the same time as in the parallel world of that day at 10050 Cielo Drive. As evening wore on, the times became increasingly precise. The complete silence, the absolute darkness – apart from meals – gave him nothing at all to go on, but Remo knew with the certainty of a clock when it turned midnight.

Sample Translation

Judgement by Shards
(Het schervengericht)
by A.F.Th. van der Heijden

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2006)

Translated by Liz Waters

[prepublication]

“What are you called?”

“I still don’t introduce myself.”

“Your name.”

“Scott Maddox.”

“Your name. The real one.”

“Maddox, Scott. Ask Carhartt. Ask The Greek.”

“They don’t know either.”

“If you do, say so.”

“Scott, who *are* you?”

“Ah, that old question again.”

“Just tell me who you are. Come on, I’ve a right to know.”

“You want to get to know me?” Maddox screamed suddenly, tugging at the clip holding the end of the bandages at this throat. “Do you want to see who I am?” Since all he could use of his bandaged hands were the skinless fingertips, the piece of metal steadily worked its way deeper into the gauze.

“Don’t bother,” said Remo. “I know who you are.”

“I know who *you* are. That’s exactly why I am bothering.”

“It was you.”

“What was me?”

“You were behind it.”

“Behind what?”

“My wife.”

“She died in childbirth.”

“With the baby still inside her, yes.”

“I’m not a midwife.”

“Your people.”

“I get it,” said Maddox. “The director.”

“The director, Scott, is what you are.”

“Two directors, at anchor on their mops.”

“They both directed their dreams.”

“With you it was all artificial light and fake blood. I’m one up on you.”

Remo let go of the handle of his squeegee and clawed with all ten fingers at the wads of dressing around Maddox’s head. “You are...” It was far from easy to start unwinding the bandages, with such violently trembling hands. Then there were the clips, one of them right at the back of the head. Remo stuck two fingers under a strip of bandage and pulled. Maddox groaned with pain and pushed at Remo’s chest with his bandaged hands, but not very strongly.

“I am,” came a muted voice from a mouth now hidden behind dislodged bandages. “I am that I am. I am that am.”

Remo went on pulling. The bandages came away in loops. A great cloud of them hung between their two heads. The final layer, firmly stuck to the burns, took even greater force to get off. Maddox kept his cries of pain low, perhaps to avoid alerting the guards.

Further down, the dressings were dirtier. Greenish with pus and ointment, flecked with blood that had gone almost black. Remo pulled, and Maddox turned on his axis, unwinding himself from the bandages.

“Who are you?”

Still no face. It was hidden behind a mass of soft brown scabs, with dotted lines of oozed blood dribbling between them, which were soon leaking profusely.

“Can’t you see who I am?”

What emerged from under the bandages was at best a gaunt, hairless head with hollow cheeks, a skull covered in dribbles of pus that looked like maggots.

“No, I can’t. Tell me who you are. ”

Across one eye was a wad of cotton wool, held in place with sticking plaster. The other eye, fierce and bloodshot, looked at Remo. The swastika... Between the ridges that must once have been eyebrows arched another yellow-brown scab, revealing nothing except for a small right-angled cut, with blood dripping from it.

This could be the face of the man he thought was lying in front of him. It could equally well be somebody else's.

[...]

Prisoner Woodehouse must have been standing down there watching me up on the top landing, because when I looked up momentarily from the report I was writing, he waved at me questioningly. Normally I'd have gestured "soon," but after that incident with the light bulb I needed to regain some of his trust. I took the shortest route down to the ground floor, the metal ladder that led through trapdoors in the guard's rooms on three successive landings. Even from a distance I could see Remo was going to play dumb. Well, so was I.

"Follow prisoner Maddox hasn't turned up for work yet."

"If I had failed to notice that, Woodehouse, I'd be a pretty poor guard."

"Sick? Solitary?"

"I'm not authorized to pass on that kind of information."

"Might I at least be told then, Mr. Agraphiotis, whether or not Maddox will be coming back as a cleaner tomorrow, or after that?"

"You seem rather attached to him."

"I can't get this job done on my own."

"Repeatedly flying at a fellow cleaner's throat doesn't exactly hurry things along, Woodehouse."

"I'm not too far behind with the sweeping. But when I get to the mopping I'm going to need help."

"Let's see how far you get. I'll mention in my report that you had to do it all on your own."

"Mr. Agraphiotis, I can't speak too highly of Choreo's humane system."

"Yes, aren't they divine people?"

What could be more beautiful than a rumour? Uncertainty about the facts of the case only makes the teller more convincing. He steps clean over his epic impotence and suddenly acquires the gift of eloquence. He becomes surprisingly

expressive, performing alchemy with invented details, persisting until granted a look inside his listener's open mouth.

We guards had been asked to keep our expressions neutral, but the director had instructed me to make "a few extra rounds" of the dining hall, keeping my ears pinned back. Remo was sitting in his usual place opposite Riot Gun, who was passing on to the others at his table what he'd heard from Pin Cushion.

"The matchhead. Crucified with his own guitar."

"Upside down, no doubt," said Jallo, to his left.

"Perfectly upright," said Riot. "In one corner of his cell was his guitar, placed carefully on the stand. With only five strings. The sixth, the thickest, was wound round the bastard's neck."

Riot's hands flapped at the collar of his overalls.

"Here, at the nape of his neck, the copper wire had been tightened with a bit of wood. Like a garrotte. The wire was driven this deep" – he indicated five centimetres with his thumb and forefinger – "into his neck."

"Arterial bleeding?" That was Janda, to Riot's right.

"Illegible scrawls of graffiti in gorgeous red, up as far as the ceiling. The idiot had put his hand up to try to stop the noose being pulled tight. His fingers were hanging rather oddly from his Adam's apple... cut to the bone."

"Tell them about the sanitary pads, Riot," said Jallo.

"Yes, this is the best bit. Those disgusting bandages? They'd been ripped off his lousy head, scabs and all and were lying next to him. And I swear to God, they had a complete imprint of his burnt mug on them. Didn't they keep some cloth of Jesus Christ's like that? A painting in blood and sweat and tears..."

"One of his fans, Veronica," said Remo, "she mopped his face with a rag."

"A watercolour like that, only in strips. That's what I was told, don't quote me. One eyelid, I understand, was hanging loose like a piece of shrivelled apple peel. His eyeball bulged out from under it, in the middle of a quivering dollop of pus. I wasn't there, but lads, let's be honest... you don't make up details like that."

“Hey, Riot, have a bit of consideration for the hotel guests’ delicate stomachs, okay?” said Janda.

“The way I heard it,” said someone at the end of the table, “he’d just got back from the nurse, with ointment freshly applied and new snow-white bandages. The pigs found him with his throat cut but his head all pristinely bandaged. Not a drop of blood.”

“Then we have a good murderer among us,” said Riot Gun. “Someone who didn’t want to ruin the nurse’s charitable work. All hope is not lost.”

“The Greek’s listening,” said Jallo, “not that it bothers me.”

I walked away, with an Escher engraving in my head, a portrait of a man that looked as if it was made from apple peel, sliced from the fruit in a single curl.