

***The Anxiety Project:***  
**My Journey to the Centre of our Deepest Fears**

By Daan Heerma van Voss

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*'Daan Heerma van Voss is without a doubt the most interesting Dutch writer of his generation. Unable to write even one dull sentence, his work is of a scope and maturity one rarely sees in a 30-year old. Saying this writer is "promising" is an understatement. That promise has been amply fulfilled.'*

– Herman Koch, author of *The Dinner*

### **The Anxiety Project: My Journey to the Centre of Our Deepest Fears**

When Dutch novelist and historian Daan Heerma van Voss finds himself in yet another break-up because he is too anxious to be with, he goes on a long journey to find the roots of his deepest fears. He is not just interested in his personal fears, he wants to dig deep and answer big questions. Why are 264 million people suffering from it, and why is this number growing every day? Where is anxiety really coming from? What do our genes have to do with it? What is the link between anxiety and creativity? And how to love when you are in a constant state of fear?

To answer these questions, Daan takes us on a profoundly moving journey from his apartment in Amsterdam to France, Jakarta and San Francisco. Along the way we'll meet philosophers, artists and writers and other fascinating individuals from around the world. Will Daan be able to save his relationship and ultimately himself?

*The Anxiety Project* is a beautifully written and brutally honest male account of everything Daan learned on his journey and will appeal to everyone who's trying to remain calm on this very nervous planet.

## Daan Heerma van Voss:



Daan Heerma van Voss has written for several national and international newspapers, such as *The New York Times*, *Vogue US*, *Pen International*, *Haaretz* (Israel), *Dissidentbloggen* (Sweden) and *Svenska Dagbladet*. His novels have been shortlisted for several awards and he was awarded De Tegel for extraordinary journalistic achievements. His much-acclaimed novel *The Last War* (2016) has been translated into German, Spanish, Swedish and Chinese. *The Anxiety Project* is his first major work of nonfiction.

Daan did a talk in English about *The Anxiety Project* for the PFD Meet the Authors event, you can watch the replay here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mKgy7LWcXA>

### **Advance praise for *The Anxiety Project*:**

**Karin Labhart, acquiring editor at Diogenes:** ‘From the very first page we were absolutely smitten by Daan’s authentic voice, his honesty and his pulsing urge to share his personal experience with anxiety with the world. Given the topic, this is a stunning act of bravery that requires courage and a willingness to lay bare one’s own vulnerability. A characteristic not so often found in male writers and therefore appreciated and needed even more. The moment of revealed vulnerability is the starting point of the book’s journey and shows that knowledge is at its best when it is applied and generously shared. We are convinced that *The Anxiety Project* will make a difference in many reader’s life regardless if they suffer from anxiety themselves. The topic concerns each and every one of us. We at Diogenes feel honoured and excited to bring Daan’s voice and message to the German speaking audience.’

**Paul Engles, acquiring editor at MacLehose Press:** ‘With *The Anxiety Project*, Daan Heerma van Voss takes a handful of all the finest non-fiction ingredients and gives them a good stir. This is a book with something new to learn on every page, from the fact that Darwin vomited five times a day from anxiety, to the way cortisol damages a rat’s brain when it’s subjected to too much stress. But it is also a personal story, and beautifully written – small things, like the way a sunset is described in a new and touching way. Timely, erudite, learned and heartfelt, it is a journey as much as it is a book, and it’s one we are proud to be taking with him as his UK publisher.’

## Chapter Overview

### 1. Flowers

In the first chapter, Daan's girlfriend is leaving him. She urges him to delve deep, and get to the bottom of his anxiety that keeps haunting him and troubles their relationship. She suggests he goes on a personal journey to find out not only where his anxiety is coming from, but also what to do about it. Will she come back? Neither of them knows.

### 2. The Vallée de Misère (included in Sample)

Daan retreats to the French countryside to recount his intimate relationship with anxiety. Also, he takes his first steps into the larger tale of fear; he discusses its origins and its long history.

### 3. Charles Darwin and the Fear of Man (included in Sample)

With help from Charles Darwin and a plethora of philosophers Daan discovers the key element that distinguishes human fear from animal fear; our imagination. It's time to leave France and start his journey in a more radical way.

### 4. The Magical Sounds of the Gamelan

Daan travels to Indonesia to find the roots of his anxiety. He discovers that his great grandfather, Jaap Kunst, who lived in Indonesia, wrote about his anxiety that was plaguing him as early as 1920. After Jaap, it was Daan's grandmother Sjuwke who inherited 'the old enemy'. After Sjuwke, his mother Christien. And then Daan. By following the roots of his anxiety, he tells the story of his family, that once lived in the former Dutch colony of Indonesia, and settled in The Netherlands. Each generation has had issues with fear, but the medical labels used to 'explain' varied in each time frame.

### 5. Soundbites and Family Trees

Daan sets the record straight on the nature vs. nurture debate when it comes to Anxiety. (The nature part of his story has been told. Up next: nurture.)

### 6. The Dark Trail of the Bat

As a child, Daan was obsessed by Batman, the one super hero whose *raison d'être* is fear. Was it a coincidence that Daan identified himself with Batman when he was

younger? How does childhood influence our susceptibility to anxiety? And what is the connection between fear and violence?

### **7. Birth of an Illness**

Daan travels through Holland, looking for the earliest traces of fear / anxiety as a modern illness. The central person in this chapter is a Dutch woman born in 1924, who suffered from war trauma, developed agoraphobia, and grew to be a leading person in bringing the fearful together in a 'fear club'. (It turns out, initiatives like hers popped up all over Europe.)

### **8. Pandora's Boxes**

Daan visits a conference on fear, held by Marina's fear club. He examines the disturbing history of the 'Anxiety Disorder', invented in 1980, and reflects on how labels can help us, but can hold us back too.

### **9. Pepijn's Pills**

This is the tale of Pepijn, a friend of Daan (they met at the conference) who suffers from an anxiety disorder. In the last few years, he was prescribed no less than ten different kinds of antidepressants. Together, in an ultimate act of friendship, they discuss how this happened, what it brought him, what it costs. Pepijn serves as a case study for the use and misuse of antidepressants.

### **10. From Solidary to Solitary (the First Lesson of the Football Pitch)**

One of the most important questions of the book is whether people have indeed become more anxious. The (limited) studies suggest we have, since the 1980's, indeed become increasingly more fearful. Walking around the football pitch of his youth, Daan tries to find out what has happened to us. Part 1: how we became more focused on the individual, and wound up sabotaging the communal ways we used to employ battling anxieties and disappointments.

### **11. The Unbearable Heritage of Narcissus (the second Lesson of the Football Pitch)**

Part 2: how we became more narcissistic, and how our expectations of life (we learned about through ideals of self-actualisation) are at odds with our actual economic and ecologic reality.

## **12. Disconnected (the Final Lesson of the Football Pitch)**

Part 3: how the internet and social media estranged us from each other, and ‘forced’ us to constantly compare our lives with the lives of others. All these macro trends combined (macro trends that are sometimes investigated separately, but never unified in a broader thesis) proved the perfect breeding ground for the modern fearful man / woman, the homo anxiosus. Upon leaving the grounds, Daan remembers how he used to be bullied here by a kid named Jaap, who will return later in the story.

### **Intermezzo. And I, O Fear**

Daan delves into Romantic poetry, and grapples with the question whether creativity and anxiety are connected, as so many artists have claimed. Or is this a cliché?

## **13. The Curious Case of Michael Bernard Loggins (included in sample)**

Daan travels to San Francisco to find a reclusive African-American outsider artist named Michael Bernard Loggins, who, due to a mental impairment, is unable to distinguish ‘real’ from ‘absurd’ fears. He lives a life ruled by fear and anxiety. A few years ago, he published a list of his 180 fears. Nowadays, he is too afraid to publish. Together with Michael, Daan goes looking for the line between genius and madness. (And they dismantle a few clichés along the way.)

## **14. The Anatomy of Failed Conversations (Before she left)**

After moving around Holland, Europa, Indonesia and San Francisco, Daan returns to an empty home. It is time to travel inwards, to find out why his girlfriend left in the first place. Who was it she saw? And why was it so difficult to talk to each other about what was happening?

## **15. Talking Colours (After she left)**

Daan contacts every fearful person he met during his travels, and together with them he tries to formulate a new language, a new way of talking with loved ones, when you or they are struck with fear or anxiety. At the end of the chapter, she returns home.

## **16. Mother of Dragon**

One day, during boxing class, Daan sees his former bully Jaap. He goes up to him, to confront him with his bullying. But immediately their conversation takes an unexpected turn. Jaap works in mental healthcare; he helps people who are not capable of finding their place in society, due to depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia. Daan goes to help Jaap with his work, and he meets Sjaak, a mental patient who gives Daan

a painting of Game of Thrones' Daenerys Targaryen as a gift. At home, he shows the painting to his girlfriend, who is not impressed.

### **17. Breaking the Wheel (final chapter)**

On vacation together, Daan realizes that his desire for a happy ending had been blinding him; things were not right. She repeatedly said she loved him, but hated his fears. He keeps thinking about Daenerys' painting; its ugliness, its beauty. More important than saving his 6-year relationship, he realized, was acknowledging his anxiety as a part of himself, not as an illness or an undesirable 'ugly' trait. Looking back on the long journey he has made, he proposes a new way of looking at fear / anxiety; not by looking at the most anxious few and labelling them as 'ill', but by acknowledging anxiety as a collective matter, that needs to be regarded and treated as such. Even if that takes hard choices to get there. In an emotional sequence, Daan and his girlfriend break up. It was not the ending he had imagined, but with relief he finds it's time for new endings, he will be writing himself.

**Sample Translation by Antoinette Fawcett  
(Chapters 2, 3 and 15)**

**2. *The Vallée de Misère***

As I look out from my log cabin onto the peaceful French meadows, I feel it creeping up once again. There's something inside me that just won't let me be – leaving me unable for even a fleeting moment to align myself to the tranquillity of the copper coloured fields, the dark and slender trees. The hazy sun, red as it rises, blue as it sets.

I'm staying with a friend in a French village situated in the aptly named *Vallée de Misère*. He's given me shelter, a place to collect my thoughts. But I remain confused and shivery, in a constant state of worry. I sleep in brief, dreamless bouts. When awake, doom-laden scenarios undistinguishable from nightmares, flash through my head. All I can do is stick to the only rule I've laid down for myself: don't phone her.

You could say it was she who led me here. We were standing in our kitchen, the only room in our apartment we built from the ground up. On the fridge: snap shots and birth cards of babies who later would call us aunt and uncle. That day I had bought her red lilies. She was cutting them, crying silently. She then turned, as strong as she was desperate, telling me I had to leave and find the answers we so much needed.

There still was a *we* to speak of, but it had become frail, brittle even.

If I am to find answers, I have to ask the right question first, the question I have been avoiding for a long time. What was this fear that held me in its grip?

So, here I am in the Valley of Misery, the first stop of the grand tour that is my anxiety project. I will attempt to put the fundamentals of fear, my fear, on paper before travelling on..

My anxiety isn't just to do with my girlfriend, I know that much. These feelings are much older than that. They run deeper. An amorphous anxiety has been my companion for as long as I can remember. It often is the first sensation of the day, and the last of the night.

I'm both one of many sufferers, 264 million to be precise, but also a very specific case. The most reliable method of measuring anxiety is via a hair test that measures cortisol levels. Recently I had those cortisol levels tested, to find out how much stress hormone is buzzing and hissing around my brain. A strand of your hair is analyzed, in my case by a medical team at the Academic Medical Centre in Amsterdam. The average anxiety density is 2.7 picogram of

cortisol per milligram of hair. People with long-term mental health problems have around 15 picograms. My tests showed, let's say, different results.

The first test, which measured my cortisol levels across three months, came out at 34.4 - thirteen times higher than the average. The second test, giving the results on a monthly basis, was even more startling: the present month was 74 picograms, the previous one 87, the one before that 132, and the last was higher than 200 picograms, *seventy-four times the average*. Just to be sure, the lead researcher had sent a sample of her own hair to the lab. Her average: 0.8. They'd never seen results like mine before. Initially they thought I might have a rare disorder, perhaps a tumour which would make my glands produce too much cortisol. I strongly doubted this and I had the feeling they did too. They tried to reassure me: the results were so bizarre they said, that it must have been an error, I should probably try to forget about it. 'Seventy-four times higher?' I asked again. 'Yes', they nodded. Weirdly, the results calmed me down. It confirmed that something was the matter with me, something tangible, something real.

My body has, in a way, grown used to "seventy-four". For a while everything is great. That's when I go travelling. That's when I'm a good friend and a loving partner. But then, because of something 'threatening' outside my control (a snarky remark, a mixed book review) anxiety takes over, overwhelms all my senses. It grows sharp and concentrates itself on one terrifying thought. This thought, then, gathers force, starts infecting every other thought. I pass an invisible tipping point, a critical line and then I'm completely *inside* it. It now consumes me.

When I'm *inside* it, ordinary things become frightening, truths grow unstable. The world around me changes. Its rhythm changes, its logic. Danger looms everywhere. The next morning, waking up, I hear trucks rumbling past my window, or are they passing through my bedroom? Doves, cooing, are sitting on the pillow next to me. Getting up, going out for my morning coffee, I can't bear to pass through streets lined with high trees. Their shadows suffocate me. As I'm not capable of explaining what exactly is happening to me, I retreat, turn inward. My world shrinks, and shrivels. Hours stretch out, become thinner. Falling asleep becomes an exhausting task. When it's really bad, weeks pass and I can't recall a single day. People I know well can tell immediately when I'm *inside* it. I sit hunched up. My shoulders and fingers tense. I'm pale and I tremble incessantly.

It has taken me years to learn how to interpret my own physical reaction, how to read the panic. The word 'reaction' is somewhat misleading, it assumes a chain of events. Whereas in practice, the perceived 'threat' and the rather extreme reaction occur simultaneously. I've often wondered whether the cause that set the panic train in motion wasn't completely

arbitrary. Perhaps, I thought, the anxiety that resides in my body was simply waiting for an excuse to come out

Those times when I may be in real danger, I tend to act resolutely. In 2015, I was embedded as a journalist with the Dutch UN troops in Mali. It was the middle of the night when the shrill siren sounded; bombs were exploding around the camp, dull, heavy bangs. An attack by Tuareg rebels. The earth beneath us all but trembled. When I opened my tent, the soldiers were racing towards shelter. I eased on my flip-flops and strolled towards the safe haven while brushing my teeth. To me, the danger was obvious and therefore simple to accept. You could compare this to the relief a hypochondriac feels when they're finally diagnosed with a disease. Of course, they're facing an imminent danger now, but they no longer have to wonder whether they're losing their minds.

Something similar happened at the beginning of the Covid crisis; during those grim, paranoid post-apocalyptic weeks and months, when anxiety and panic had suddenly become a collective state of mind, I was strangely calm. I did what I had to do and helped others where I could. Calm concentration seized hold of me. I had almost no issues with anxiety. Instead, it was the other way round: the world seemed to have adopted my crisis mode. Friends asked me for advice.

The first panic attack I can remember struck when I was six or seven years old. I was at my parent's holiday home, a small cottage in the middle of the woods in the North of Holland. Not far from the house was a little stream and to cross it, you had to walk over a small, rotten piece of wood. It was impossible to see how deep the water exactly was. One day, as I stepped upon it, the plank groaned. Frantically I leaped across to the other side. Just in time, I thought and as the day went on, I forgot about it.

However, that night in bed, my heart began to race. I started panting, coughing, retching. I struggled out from under my dinosaur duvet, climbed out of the bunkbed and dashed to the ice-cold bathroom. The tears in my eyes distorted my vision: I saw flashes of a tap, pale tiles, and behind the dingy shower curtain, the lawnmower my mother always kept in the shower-room, to stop it going rusty.

She tapped on the door in alarm, twice, thrice, and asked if I was okay. Although I wheezed out a 'yes', I had no idea what had happened to me.

For me, fear and a shortness of breath have always been closely connected.

In my early years I had a lot of breathing problems, which meant I ended up first in an incubator and then, over and over again, in various hospital beds. I suffered from asthma, spasmodic croup, laryngitis – name any kind of respiratory illness and I had it.

At home, I would wake up at night anxiously spluttering. My mother would turn on the hot water tap until the bathroom was full of steam. The vapour helped me get my breath back. I felt at home and protected in this dense mist.

Who else had breathing problems as a child? David Blaine, ‘the man without fear’. In his career as a stuntman and illusionist, Blaine, an admirer of Houdini, has been buried alive, spent sixty hours encased in ice, and was suspended in a see-through cabin above the Thames, spending forty-four days there without any food. The reason that Blaine started doing these stunts? He was determined to conquer his breathing problems. Nevertheless, even the man without fear is nowadays frightened of something. He’s afraid that his little daughter, apparently having inherited fearlessness, won’t be able to recognize danger.

That strong link between breathing problems and fear is also apparent in language. The word ‘angst’ (which appears in various forms in Dutch, Danish, German, Swedish and Norwegian) and the word ‘anxiety’ (which has cognates in more or less all the Romance languages) both stem from the Indo-Germanic root ‘Angh’, meaning to ‘tighten’ or ‘constrict’. The Greek word ‘anchein’ (‘strangle’) derives from this root and we can also find the ur-word in the Latin word ‘angor’, which means ‘constriction’ or ‘contraction’.

In recent years, trying to gain understanding of what was troubling me, I began reading about fear and anxiety in an obsessive way. Books piled up and my study grew fuller and fuller. I clung to facts; big facts, such as that fear is universal - occurs throughout the world; little facts, such as certain fears are culture-specific. Take the Chinese fear, known as *koro*, that your genitals will shrink and eventually disappear into your lower abdomen. Or the Japanese *taijin kyofusho*: the fear that your personal style or physical presence is offensive to others. My favourite is the Inuit *kayak angst*: a series of panic attacks caused by a prolonged lack of sensory stimulation during kayak hunting.

However, not a single fact freed me from my own fear.

I did discover, however, that I’m by no means alone.

In the mornings, while it’s still dark in the Vallée, I’m woken by the forlorn braying of a solitary donkey. The first thing I do is check my weather app. I want to know what the weather is like in Amsterdam, whether my girlfriend’s days are rainy or sunny. I hope it’s the latter: the scent of sun-tan oil when I press my nose against her shoulder. How she squints, without ever looking away from the sun.

My desk in the log cabin – actually a picnic table – is strewn with books about fear, panic papers and anxiety articles. The books are sorted by genre and placed in alphabetical order within each genre, and within that order I have arranged them chronologically – I have created a labyrinth of paper for myself, where only I can find the way, if there is a way at all.

In the afternoons I wander in the dense forest, ominously steaming after heavy rainfall. I walk until my feet are tired. When evening falls, the birds hide away and the hedges and coppices seem to sing, murmur and gossip. My friend makes fish fingers for dinner – you could describe them as both under-cooked and burnt – and after that he offers me one of his cigars. In the deckchairs on the patio, we talk over a day that has brought us nothing in particular. At the weekend we go to a bar in the nearby village and watch a classic cycle race in the company of a five-toothed man dressed in a fraying Johnny Hallyday t-shirt.

Very occasionally my friend will ask about her.

‘Too soon,’ I reply.

When I first arrived here, my friend’s cousin had just left. In the course of a week this cousin had gone through several breakdowns and anxiety attacks. Trembling and agitated, he made plans to radically change his life, plans he most likely would never fulfil. He refused to sleep on the east side, and then on the west as well. Eventually he couldn’t sleep at all; he drank a lot though, and swallowed all sorts of pills that had little or no effect. It wasn’t easy for him to leave the place either, because motorways scared him and he didn’t dare drive any faster than forty-five miles an hour. That meant it would take him more than half a day to reach his house in Koblenz, chugging along country roads. Half a day in a car, in this state of panic! The day before I arrived, the village doctor had put a shot of Valium into his arm. Shortly after, he finally calmed down.

According to our best estimates, 7.3 per cent of people worldwide are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. The anxiety disorder label is determined by consulting the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the DSM, the standard handbook on psychological disorders. It can be found in every doctor’s surgery. The DSM was created in 1952; the anxiety disorder in 1980. At some point in their lives, around one in five of the Dutch population will develop an anxiety disorder, defined in the DSM as ‘an excessive anxiety and worry (apprehensive expectation), occurring more days than not for at least six months, about a number of events or activities. As you read these words, over a million Dutch people are actually living with an anxiety disorder. There’s no reason to assume this is different in other (Western) countries.

The statistics don’t get any better looking further afield. According to estimates, 18.5 million Europeans aged between 18 to 65 suffer from a phobia, and a further 6.7 million have a social phobia. In America it’s even worse. In the US one in three people will develop an anxiety disorder at some point in their lives. Annually, around 18 per cent of the American population – approximately forty million people – suffer from an anxiety disorder. That is about twice as many people as have depression. If these statistics really scare you, there’s a chance you’re suffering from arithmophobia, a fear of statistics, figures and numbers. However, as I will argue later on in this book, such statistics – and the definitions of anxiety

that undergird them – can be misleading. To name one thing, it pays off to examine whose interests are served by the DSM diagnoses. But all that is for later.

Halfway through the day, when all these anxiety stories start making me dizzy, I escape from my paper labyrinth and stroll through the woods of the Vallée, past meadows full of rolled-up hay tongues, rusty tractors, and furrows that resemble solidified waves.

The dreading of my own fear plays into many decisions I make in my life, I muse while passing a stray cat bathing in the sun. Whatever I decide to do, I mustn't wake the monster.

Although I've grown used to its presence, I still find it hard to distinguish fear from intuition. In neurological terms, this is perfectly understandable: the registration of threats alters the physiology of the brain. The release of fear-related hormones, such as serotonin and dopamine, makes you more alert and sharper, but also more susceptible to new stimuli. Fearful people can perceive threats considerably faster than non-fearful people, but fearful people are burdened with an interpretation bias (registering benign or neutral stimuli as threatening) as well as a judgement bias (an expectation of negative incidents in the future, and an assumption that the consequences of those incidents will be disproportionately heavy). Now, imagine that you can't tell the difference between fear and intuition. It cultivates a suspicion towards the self. If you no longer know whether your intuition of what is a true threat and what isn't is trustworthy, you'll be a hostage to your own imagination, fears spreading like wildfire.

If I'm completely honest, fear has largely determined the way I interact with others, friends and strangers. Friendships have perished because of it; relationships have been pared away. On some days I think that what others see as my "character" is no more than the set of characteristics that have come about as a response to my fears. Every time the monster manifests itself, I'm convinced that this manifestation is essentially a confession, made by my true self.

The monster. The exact words my mother used, the exact words of my grandmother, and her father's too.

One day, back in my cabin after another afternoon walk, I open the pages of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

The main character, Dr. Henry Jekyll, is a Victorian doctor who is trying to find out whether the good and evil forces in ourselves can be separated from each other. Via an intense process of experimentation, he discovers a serum that upon ingestion unleashes the evil inside him. His other half is born: the brutal Edward Hyde, who yields completely to his (sometimes murderous) passions. The only way the monster can change back into the benevolent doctor is via an anti-serum.

Well, which of these two halves is the most tormented?

Not the monster, Mr. Hyde, I would argue. It's Dr. Jekyll: the one who fears the monster inside of himself, who is always worried about when it will surface and what it will destroy this time. Even more suffocating than the panic attack is the fear of the next panic attack.

To protect myself, I've often made my life as small as possible. When I was a student I made sure that my room was internet-free, and always left my phone out in the corridor. My main concern was to ward off supposed dangers, to evade them, or invalidate them. In the break between lectures I'd flee to the men's room, where I tried to get through my panic attack without anyone hearing. I developed a strong sympathy for a particular cubicle, where a certain René had declared his love for a certain Marie, in a little heart on the wall, made of scratched lines.

Rationally speaking, my fears are absurd: I've rarely known real dangers. I come from a safe and prosperous part of a safe and prosperous city in a safe and prosperous country; millions of people have had harder lives than me. I was raised by loving parents, who wanted the best for me (and still do). Even when things went awry, there was a safety net. I have benefitted immensely from the privileged circumstances of my life. It's true that these didn't manage to shield me from fear and the occasional unhappiness, but they did ensure that I never succumbed, or made choices that were irreparably awful. I could always count on someone being there who'd say: don't be afraid, it'll turn out alright. Millions of those struggling with fear don't have the resources I've been able to draw on. Where I've managed to 'pull through', many others have perished, dropped out, or ended up on the margins of society. You will meet them too on these pages.

Their place on those margins is linked to the fact that in the West fear and anxiety have been heavily medicalized. (By the West I mean roughly Western Europe, Canada, North America, and Australia). In classical antiquity, fear was primarily seen as a bodily affliction, in the Middle Ages as a symptom of demonic possessions, in the nineteenth century as a philosophical problem. Nowadays it's a mental illness, a disorder, which you ward off with therapy and pills.

But this is just the latest phase in the story of fear.

Where does that story really start?

Does it start with the Greek God Pan, that ugly pug-nosed man whose yell filled humans and gods with fear, the primeval ancestor of our word 'panic'? Or with Phobos, son of Ares, the god of war, and of Aphrodite, the goddess of love? Phobos was the personification of war-related fears. Soldiers worshipped him for that reason. In his name we can recognize the word 'phobia'. Or perhaps the story begins with Nicanor and Democles, who were described by Hippocrates, and were possibly the first official anxiety-sufferers on record. Nicanor panicked

each time he heard the sound of a flute, and Democles suffered from a paralyzing fear of heights. Hippocrates wrote that Democles was unable to walk along a cliff-top, or go onto ‘a bridge to cross a ditch of the least depth’, without being afraid of falling.

My papers rustle. I hastily turn the pages back and forth, and back again. It stays light for a long time in the wooden hut.

Here in the serenity of the Vallée de Misère I can read endlessly, put the pieces together and reflect, while the routines of country life give me sufficient grip to ensure that I won’t get lost in the text. The days pass slowly and the weeks go fast. In the meantime, I’m beginning to get more and more acquainted with the material. Then, on a perfectly normal day, I suddenly realize that a crucial chapter of the story starts with a ship and an anchor.

### ***3. Human Fear and the Case of Charles Darwin***

On 17 September 1835 Charles Darwin’s ship, the *Beagle*, weighed anchor in the small, picturesque harbour of Stephen’s Bay, in a little island in the southern Pacific Ocean. As soon as he stepped off board, he was struck by the biological diversity of the island. ‘Little birds within 3 & four feet, quietly hopped about the Bushes,’ he noted in his diary ‘& were not frightened by stones being thrown at them. Mr. King killed one with his hat & I pushed off a branch with the end of my gun a large Hawk.’ Darwin reasoned that the unsuspecting birds had known so few natural enemies that their most important mechanism of protection, the fear response, had not been sufficiently developed. He concluded that natural selection worked to their disadvantage; they would become extinct due to a lack of fear. ‘Nevertheless, even extreme fear often acts at first as a powerful stimulant,’ he wrote elsewhere.

Darwin confirmed, on biological grounds, the simple definition of fear that had been formulated by Aristotle: fear is an (essential) unpleasant physical experience, triggered by the threat of danger. These reactions appear in every organism: even a unicellular paramecium – a slipper animalcule – swims away if you prick it with a minuscule needle. As for human beings, when the fetus perceives a bright light it tries to fend it off. In other words, before we are even born we display behaviours that could be described as fearful. The first years of our lives, moreover, are not particularly free from fear. We are totally incapable of coping by ourselves; we crawl about, helpless and needy, surrounded by risks and dangers that we do not understand as such. As we get older and learn how to tune our fears, these dangers largely lose their charge. But sometimes that tuning doesn’t work very well. That is why Aristotle’s simple definition is misleading. For humans, the concepts of ‘danger’ and ‘threat’ are diffuse

and up for discussion: one person will experience more perils than another, and what for some is a danger, means nothing at all to others.

In order to understand why there is such a big difference in the way people experience their fears, it is useful to make a distinction between human fear (that is to say, the kind of fear that only humans feel) and animal fear. Roughly speaking, animal fear is a reflex and human fear is an experience. I put aside the books by and about Darwin, and switch to the fist-thick biological and neurological handbooks I've lugged to the Vallée. What all those books have in common is an extraordinary interest in the rat.

The rat brain is actually a simplified scale model of the human brain. (This is the reason that researchers often use rats and mice as laboratory animals). The rat amygdala checks every incoming stimulus for potential danger. If the danger appears real, then the hypothalamus, by swiftly producing more adrenaline, puts the body into the fight, flight, or freeze mode. This is the crisis mode, the heightened physical state that we, as humans, are also acquainted with in our everyday lives, when we realize we've forgotten our bank card, or we're in danger of missing our train. That mode also has its advantages. Contemporary research has shown that if someone is a little anxious they will perform their task better than if they're completely relaxed. Too little fear, and you won't perform well, while with too much fear, you'll clam up. This is called the Yerkes-Dodson Law.

The amygdala, that little almond-shaped organ at the base of our brain, is crucial for the detection of threats. Rats whose amygdala has been removed no longer display the fear response. The same is true for humans whose amygdala is damaged. For some years researchers at the University of Iowa have been studying a woman, code named S.M., whose amygdala has been destroyed by disease. She is the only person on record that we know for sure has experienced no fear. But psychopaths very often do not have properly functioning amygdalae either, which means that they barely experience fear and cannot observe or understand it in others.

After a short time in crisis mode, the rat produces a second hormone: cortisol, the same stress hormone I proved to have in such abundance. Cortisol is necessary for the physical response to fear, the actual fighting, fleeing or freezing. When the danger lessens, then the adrenaline is slowly reduced, until the body eventually attains its normal 'safe' state. If you tap a rat, it leaps away. It flees. If you do that a few times, it will attack you. It fights. But if you prod it long enough, it digs a little burrow for itself that it won't leave, even when you finally stop prodding it. Cortisol has damaged its brain cells and depressed its immune system. Its fear has become chronic.

This system of physical responses is called the fear system, although we should really speak of the fear-detection system. Once upon a time, human beings, like every other animal, had

natural enemies – the sabre-toothed tiger, say, or the snake – and hence we have a similar fear-detection system as the rat. Yet what I call human fear is something different: a layered experience rather than a biological reflex. I believe that there are two major differences between humans and animals that have made our fear more complex than the rat's. Allow me to explain.

Every night, over the course of several weeks when I was six or seven, as soon as my bedside lamp (a smiling moon) was switched off, I obsessively tried to work out what it would be like for me to be dead. These attempts always led to me losing control of my thoughts, to panic - it felt as if I was endlessly falling. The concept of death deeply troubled me. To be more precise: it was the idea that one day I would completely vanish, as if I had never existed. Friends at school explained that their grannies and grandpas were watching them from heaven. I couldn't understand how that would work. What did they sit on? And did they chat with passing astronauts and space explorers? If so, what language did they speak? And the most important question: who brought the snacks? When I asked my father once how he coped with the idea of death, he answered: I don't. Not a single adult ever spoke about death, or even seemed to think about it, I discovered. They used the same coping strategy as Woody Allen, who said: 'I'm not afraid of death; I just don't want to be there when it happens.' The shadow of death is always present. We simply ignore it.

That is the first difference between animal fear and human fear: in contrast to animals, humans have an awareness from an early age of their finiteness. This is due to our better-developed limbic system, which takes care of our emotions, and our larger prefrontal cortex, which makes possible our capacity for abstract thought and language. Without language, it is impossible to conceptualize the world around us and to form and interpret abstractions. Other primates do display many signs of consciousness. But what they don't have is a language to shape abstract thoughts and ideas. Humans are the only kind of animal that lives with the absurd awareness that we shall die. The fear of dying is the archetypal fear and has been perceived as such at least since the time of the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius: it is the fear from which all other fears derive. But I believe we should be a little more precise: death is indeed the original source of fear, but the real fear is to do with our defenselessness. The curious thing, therefore, is that humans enjoy greater security than more or less any other animal, yet we experience more fear, because at the back of our minds there is always the thought that our lives are temporary, vulnerable and relative, even a little ridiculous perhaps. Then the second difference. Consider how as a boy I tried to grasp what it would be like to be dead, consider what we all do every day: we use our powers of imagination and try to put into words our thoughts and feelings. We have our strongly developed prefrontal cortex to thank for that too. Grivets – African green monkeys – have a range of distress signals; great tits have

an alarm call for a snake slithering towards them. But that concrete 'language' is limited to the here and now. What animals can't do is form abstractions or communicate them; even the simplest information about events in the past or future is something they can't convey. Whereas the main role of the amygdala is to register threats and produce the hormones that enable the most appropriate physical reaction, our prefrontal cortex constantly interprets our behaviour, our thoughts and memories, so that it can create some kind of comprehensible unity or narrative – one that will get us through the day. Without the prefrontal cortex, no consciousness.

What does this have to do with fear?

Many studies have shown that the amygdala can react to threatening stimuli by raising the heartbeat, for example, or producing more sweat, without the test subject being aware of this and without them, therefore, feeling anxious or fearful. We can thus make a distinction between fearful behaviour (animal fear) and a frightening experience (human fear). Human fear isn't really characterized by the measurable physical symptoms associated with fear, because the rat has these too. Human fear is characterized by the conscious awareness of these symptoms, and then by wanting to describe the experience. From this we can deduce that for humans there is no such thing as 'unconscious fear' or 'unconscious anxiety'. As soon as you notice the fear or anxiety in yourself, or place certain vague negative feelings under those headings, then you are consciously experiencing them.

Because of our consciousness and language capacity, humans can picture countless things that may or may not lie ahead: from diseases that may affect us to great loves that we may meet, or perhaps miss out on. Consciously or unconsciously, we are constantly conjuring up simulations of what may happen if we make a particular choice and what might have happened if we had done something different; we're always moving through parallel pasts and futures; we torture ourselves with infinite possibilities. The terrifying problem that humans therefore have is that their imagination gets in the way of their ability to judge what harm really is approaching and what is simply imaginary.

Night falls in the Vallée. The rain drums down fiercely on the combine harvester left behind in the meadow. New books about fear lie in the corner of my room, and texts that my great-grandfather wrote, which I'd asked to be sent to me, delivered today by the postman – a man with a poignant face, full of lines and wrinkles. I walk in my slippers to the window (the floor is icy cold). Five cows are ambling in search of shelter towards the row of trees at the right-hand side of the meadow. The sky is invaded by stars, fiercely bright and light-blue. The susurration of the rain increases; the cabin creaks and groans. Once I've put the rusty old coffee percolator on the stove (it's going to be another long night), I put the neurological books aside and set to work on the philosophical.

Fear as an ailment of the imagination: in the words of the thirteenth-century philosopher, Thomas Aquinas, a *perturbatio imaginationis*. Aquinas fits into a long tradition of philosophers who use the example of the plank to illustrate the relationship between fear and imagination. From the fact that someone can walk across a plank laid on grass without any difficulty, but panics when the same plank is placed over an abyss, Aquinas deduced that it is primarily the human imagination that fills us with fear. Before Aquinas, the tenth-century Arab philosopher Avicenna had already noted that someone walking across a plank placed above a ravine is more likely to fall than someone strolling over a plank lying on the ground, although the action of walking is the same in both cases. And then there was the learned Robert Burton, whose magnum opus *The Anatomy of Melancholy* was one of the first standard works in the realm of psychiatric medicine. He tells the story of a Jew in France who ‘came by chance over a dangerous passage or plank, that lay over a brook in the dark, without harm... who the next day perceiving what danger he was in, fell down dead.’ In other words, in the dark, without any visual input, the French Jew’s imagination did not produce fear. But in the daytime, when he saw he could easily have fallen, he was so overcome by fear that he dropped down dead. Burton’s conclusion: the imagination is far stronger than reason.

And given that every human being possesses the power of imagination, everyone can suffer from ‘imaginary’ fears. Is the fear of flying (aviophobia) imaginary? Or only for those who aren’t pilots? Let’s agree at any rate that some of the children in Stephen King’s *It* would have lived considerably longer lives if they’d displayed a little more coulrophobia, the ‘imaginary’ fear of those scary beings that we call ‘clowns’.

After a good thirty years of experiencing both, the difference between real and imaginary fears has become fairly uninteresting to me. Fears that seem strange or disproportionate to an observer, can be of existential importance for the sufferer. Whether it’s someone suffering from unspecified anxiety or someone with a phobia of nuts and bolts – when you ask them enough questions, you’ll see that they have the feeling that their survival is at stake. Fear is always existential. And the less a fear seems grounded in reality, the stranger and more inconceivable that fear is, the more it says about the fearful one, who they are, what they want, and what they are truly afraid of losing or not getting. Moreover, from a neurological and physical perspective, every fear, however innocent or ‘imaginary’ its original cause, is equally real.

And yet the way we judge anxious others largely depends on our opinion about the ‘legitimacy’ of their fears (by which is very often meant the innocuous cause of those fears). Often enough, in everyday usage, the terms ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ carry the subtle connotations of ‘justified’ and ‘unjustified’. If we judge the fears to be real, or understandable, then we feel sorry for those suffering from them and offer our sympathy and advice. If we find them imaginary or

incredible, then we brush the sufferers aside, turn away from them, or say they're putting it on. A hundred thousand years of experience of fear, and the way we talk about it is still clumsy and moralistic.

No one better illustrates the effective pointlessness of thinking in terms of 'justified' or 'unjustified' fears than Michael Bernard Loggins. Michael, born in San Francisco in 1961, has a developmental disability that means he has difficulties in correctly assessing the seriousness of 'threats'. As a result, he suffers from an enormous number of fears, which all carry equal weight for him. In 1994, when Michael was asked to write down his fears, he noted one hundred and eighty-three of them, from medical fears, to paranoid and abstract fears, to pretty specific ones, such as that your favourite noodles will be eaten up by a man called Douglas. He circulated his lists in the form of hand-stapled mimeographs, which were later collected and published as a small, printed edition. Michael Bernard Loggins demonstrates what I've already intuitively suspected: you don't have to take the fear of death any more seriously than the fear that Douglas will eat up your favourite noodles. In fact, the fear of Douglas threatening to eat up your favourite noodles can be more asphyxiating than the absolute inevitability of death.

What does it feel like, exactly, when that fear or panic kicks in?

The measurable physical characteristics that belong to sudden fear are the same as those that affected me in the bathroom of my parent's cottage: excessive sweating, the heart beating faster and faster, tightness of the chest, tense muscles, a dry mouth, a digestive system that stops working, tingling fingertips. That physicality, the corporeal aspect of the fear experience, is a crucial part of what fear is. William James, the American philosopher and 'father of psychology', wrote as early as 1890 that he couldn't imagine what 'kind of emotion of fear would be left, if the feelings neither of quickened heart-beats nor of shallow breathing, neither of trembling lips nor of weakened limbs, neither of goose-flesh nor of visceral stirrings, were present. Can one fancy the state of rage and picture no ebullition of it in the chest, no flushing of the face, no dilation of the nostrils, no clenching of the teeth, no impulse to vigorous action, but in their stead limp muscles, calm breathing and a placid face?'

But even if you're able to point out and distinguish the various faltering physical processes within this state of restricted consciousness, even if you could precisely measure which hormones your brain produces when you feel threatened, even then what fear exactly is will elude you. Someone doesn't cry because of their tears, someone doesn't feel sick because of their vomit. The conscious experience of fear, the perception of it (which by definition is subjective), forms an essential element of the phenomenon of fear.

The perception of fear and anxiety has traditionally been the domain of philosophers.

The fact that you never precisely know where your anxiety comes from made Martin Heidegger argue that 'angst' is 'nowhere' in particular: 'that which threatens cannot bring itself close from

a definite direction within what is close; it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere.’ The anxiety is the aggressor, you are passive. And yet the anxiety does come from within yourself. Are you responsible for your fears, or do your fears take all responsibility out of your hands? Are you a perpetrator or a victim? Can someone be both at the same time?

That ‘totality’ of the experience of anxiety can be found in almost all the accounts that anxious people give of it. The most poetic and at the same time most recognizable account of anxiety I’ve encountered is in a doctoral thesis about anxiety and fear, written by Dutch psychiatrist Gerrit Glas. The account was given in 1991 by B., a thirty-five-year-old man whom Glas recorded several times. B. described anxiety as: ‘An emptiness in the stomach, which moves and can be felt. It’s a feeling and at the same time a bodily sensation, in your head and in your body, it’s a single whole, and it’s almost impossible to work out where exactly it begins.’

The intensity of the panic, the degree to which fear can clench up your throat, how it can stun you so terribly that you no longer see any way out, these effects can barely be quantified or demonstrated, but I can attest to them. And so can you, most likely.

Charles Darwin, who wrote so acutely about fear as a biological phenomenon, suffered from severe breakdowns, from palpitations, from very regular episodes of hyper-ventilation. The most he could work was for an hour a day, and he threw up at least five times daily. Some years ago, after studying all of Darwin’s diaries and letters and the medical reports about him, a group of American doctors concluded that Darwin would nowadays undoubtedly be diagnosed as having a panic disorder. He displayed nine of the thirteen symptoms (it only takes four). Anyone on the right side of the line today, could find themselves on the wrong side tomorrow: anyone who can be called ‘healthy’ today, could be classified as ‘sick’ tomorrow. It remains interesting to me how such a line – and its parameters – gets drawn in the first place (I will return to this later).

I shut the books. Having put these fundamentals down on paper, I sense that my time in the Vallée is coming to an end. It’s time to leave the world of writing and dig deeper into my own fears and anxieties, which are less exclusive to me than I might’ve thought in the past. My family members, after all, suffered from the same symptoms, anxiety has run through our genes for centuries. Or am I leaning too much on biology? Could it instead be that someone’s life circumstances make them anxious? In any case, I know where to start my quest, where and with whom: with Jaap Kunst, my ancestor, who lived in Indonesia.

After booking my flight from the Vallée to Jakarta, I contact a number of experts by email. These experts have stood out in recent years as being up-to-date with current research on fear. They’ll pop up every now and then in the course of my journey, to advise me or provide me with insights. I put the most important works inside my suitcase, or save them on my laptop;

my friend in the Vallée de Misère will send me the remainder. In the middle of a meadow, surrounded by straw and thistles, where the network reception is slightly less awful, I download the maps I expect I'll need in Indonesia. Perhaps, I think as I walk back to my cabin, I should stop liking fear to a monster, but instead see it as a co-driver, one who doesn't want to share the road map. Perhaps he'll shift place in the course of the journey, change to the back seat, or sneak into the trunk. Sometimes he might even try and take the driver's seat, but the very fact that you're reading this will mean that he hasn't succeeded in staying there.

It's my last night in France. My leave-taking of my friend is stoical yet warm. A last supper of fish fingers and Carrefour wine. Around eleven o'clock we give each other a brotherly hug, saying nothing at all, out of fear of sentimentality. I'm mildly proud to be making it out of the valley without a Valium shot in my arm.

In my narrow bed, thinking back to the plank of my childhood, I picture it lying exactly as Avicenna said, above a ravine instead of over a little Dutch rivulet. Instead of crossing it with dread, I calmly look down. The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who compared fear to an abyss, wrote that learning to know anxiety is an adventure that every human must go through. I walk on. For just as long as it takes for me to end up in the Far East, in Jakarta.

### ***15. The Curious Case of Michael B. Loggins***

The Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco. My suitcase is weighed down with books of Romantic poetry and scientific articles. And wrapped up in socks and t-shirts there's also a print of Edvard Munch's 'Angst' ('Anxiety'), one of the masterpieces from his Frieze of Life series (1902), in which he reserved a place for every kind of fear. (The most famous, of course, is anxious despair, as portrayed in 'The Scream'). This print is a gift for the American outsider artist Michael Bernard Loggins, who in 2004 published a long list of his fears, a work of art in book-form. Fear has taken such a heavy toll on Michael's life that he will probably never reach a large audience. But where does the border between genius and madness lie? In other words, how many fears can you have before they turn truly destructive?

It wasn't easy getting a hold of Michael. He doesn't have his own email address. Via the small publisher that released *Fears of Your Life*, I track down two go-betweens: the owner of the workshop-cum-art-studio where Michael sometimes drops by and his health advisor. They know where Michael lives, but tell me he's never at home. They suggest hanging around in the park he regularly goes to. So that's what I do: day after day I sit on park benches, but in vain.

Perhaps, Go-between No. 1 suggests, it might be a good idea in the meantime to buy a few more gifts to add to my print. Michael really loves 45s, old singles. I scour through run-down record shops and acquire five vintage records. And then, thanks to force majeure, I finally get good news. Michael's health advisor phones to say that because Michael has had an operation on his foot he can no longer wander freely around the city. And so today, on this sunny Californian Friday, I can drop by to see him at his assisted living accommodation, in the centre of what used to be the city's principal hippie quarter, where even today hundreds of the homeless, wearing garbage bag ponchos, sing that they've defeated the system.

Michael, an African-American, lives in a room of about six by five metres, but it feels smaller because everywhere there are piles of clothes and boxes of records. There's a plastic Christmas tree, and a shopping cart stuffed full of clothes. Michael is lying on top of his bed. His foot is bandaged. He's wearing checked pyjama trousers, and no top. On his right leg there's still a warning written by the doctor: it's this leg!

The 45s I've brought along go down well. I'm allowed to play them there and then. Aretha Franklin and Howlin' Wolf. Michael gives a running commentary, but it takes a while before I understand him. He has some teeth missing, smacks his lips while he talks, and is very associative. Moreover, he likes to use words he invented himself, such as 'blue out' (a milder version of 'blackout'), 'dramaticalisms' (examples of dramatic behaviour), 'humanful' (kind, considerate) and the unforgettable 'clownsmanship' (the phenomenon of a group of clowns getting on well with each other).

During this first meeting he continuously asks questions, and every question feels like a test. Some questions are difficult to answer, such as: how old were you when you were young? Or what do you like best? The cash you pay for lemonade or for girl scout cookies? I have no idea what the correct answers are, but I immediately notice if I give the wrong one; Michael's face is expressive – if he's happy, he laughs with all he has, or he twists his face in horror if that's not the case. Words are important to him. If we don't know what words mean, he explains, how can we ever talk to each other? He calls the search for the correct meaning of words 'taming the world'. At the end of our meeting, I'm allowed to help him walk to the bathroom; his hand is damp and limp. The trust he places in me is pure and complete – the kind of trust that must have led to a great deal of pain in other situations.

Two days later I'm back in his room again. This time I've brought a new peace offering: cheeseburgers. It's a lucid day for him, memories aren't difficult to find, although they remain largely disordered. Michael leaps through his personal history. He was born in 1961, in San Francisco, in a family with nine children. He quickly ended up in an incubator and had stubborn thyroid problems, so that as a child he couldn't speak, only point, scream and kick up a rumpus. The family moved around a lot, didn't settle anywhere. By his own account he

was given the name 'Michael' because no one else in his family was called that – a typical example of Michaellesque logic. He was three when he started writing, mainly because he couldn't talk. So what did he write about? 'Things that happened to me, that I didn't understand. Things that were suddenly gone. Things that hurt.' Michael sketched and wrote at his parents' kitchen table, sometimes for hours at a time. 'It made me happy, and that really surprised my mother. And I wanted to get better at it. And then I actually got good at it. My thoughts move very quickly when I'm working, they shoot past on every side. When Michael Bernard Loggins writes,' he sums up, 'then he's just like a real person.' What does he mean by that? That by writing about his own pain, he feels like a real person?

Artists have been open about their psychological instability since ancient times, often interpreting it as an expression of melancholy, that category of disease which since Greek Antiquity has occupied a special place in the world of illnesses, not only as a forerunner of depression and anxiety disorders, but also as a condition of genius. 'There is also a madness which is a divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men,' Socrates had said. Madness is, therefore, 'superior to a sane mind for the one is only of human, but the other of divine origin.' According to Socrates the work of an artist who isn't touched by divine madness, who thinks that he or she will manage by technique alone, will always be surpassed by the achievements of the inspired madman, for 'the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman.'

Following Socrates, Aristotle wondered why it was that 'all those who have become eminent in philosophy or politics or poetry or the arts are clearly of an atrabilious temperament, and some of them to such an extent as to be affected by diseases caused by black bile?' According to him this was because of the unique ratio in melancholics of black bile and the other bodily humours. This balance is precarious; if it is disturbed, the melancholic could lose himself in strange or extravagant behaviour. By the end of the book Aristotle has turned his already bold opening statement on its head, by arguing that all melancholics are exceptional. With this conclusion Aristotle was indirectly reacting to Socrates: the madness that is divine is called melancholy.

Artists of all lands, ages, and disciplines have pointed to their inner pain as the true author of their work: Ludwig van Beethoven, who proclaimed melancholy to be his muse; Friedrich Schiller, who was of the opinion that we are all melancholics; Edgar Allan Poe, who declared himself to be in love with melancholy; Van Gogh, who said that his creativity kept pace with his mental illnesses; Virginia Woolf, who called melancholy the most important source of her inspiration; Joni Mitchell, who described her depressions as 'the sand that makes the pearl'; John Cale, who sings that fear is a man's best friend; Edvard Munch, who called his 'life-anxiety' his pre-eminent compass ('My art is grounded in reflections over being different from

others. My sufferings are part of myself and my art. They are indistinguishable from me, and their destruction would destroy my art, I want to keep those sufferings.’); the Dutch short story writer Maarten Biesheuvel, who stated that all his work had its origins in anxiety; the Dutch poet and writer Joost Zwagerman, who in one of his last poems wrote: ‘Always scared. Always scared of everything. Of dreams and demons. Of being shut out and of almost every stranger. Of the elements. Of one people and one nation. Of crowds, the doorbell, being punished. Always scared. Always scared of everything.’

According to the poet T.S. Eliot there is, in fact, a direct and striking relationship between fear and inspiration. Eliot didn’t perceive inspiration as something positive, that is, as a welling up within, but as something negative, the falling away of limitations. ‘To me it seems,’ he says, ‘that at these moments, which are characterised by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something negative: that is to say, not ‘inspiration’ as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers’.

Grand names, which mean nothing, or very little, to Michael.

In my hotel room that night I start reading some of the texts I’ve brought with me. It becomes apparent that these great artists weren’t just playing around with ‘madness’. In 1972 the psychologist Colin Martindale published a study of the lives of twenty-one famous English poets and twenty-one French poets. Martindale concluded that more than 55 percent of the English poets and 40 percent of the French had a history of severe psychological problems – nervous breakdowns, psychotic episodes, alcoholism, admissions into psychiatric institutions, suicide. (The corresponding percentage in the general population was between 1 and 2 percent).

Another interesting study was conducted by the psychiatrist Arnold Ludwig, who investigated the lives of artists interviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* between 1960 and 1990. Ludwig discovered that these artists were two to three times more likely of experiencing mental health problems than non-artists. Their chance of involuntary admission was six or seven times higher. But the largest study was probably carried out by the psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison. In 1993 Jamison investigated all the great British and Irish writers born between 1705 and 1805. She read their works, examined their medical dossiers, sifted through their letters and poked around in the comments made about them by their contemporaries. She found that poets had a twenty times greater than average chance of compulsory admission to an institution. More than half the poets suffered from mood swings and their chance of manic-depression was more than thirty times higher. The majority of the poets of 18th century England would today probably be diagnosed as needing treatment. Samuel Johnson? Johnson suffered regular breakdowns throughout his life; he had tics, obsessions, and phobias, and

perceived himself as being chronically melancholic. In his case, the modern diagnosis would probably be 'depressive'. Robert Burns? Seasonal melancholy, which he described as 'a diseased nervous System'. The likely modern diagnosis would be manic-depression, just as for William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, John Keats and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Coleridge was quite explicit about the melancholic, fearful feelings that plagued him were also the 'flames' that kept his inner poet alive. 'We of the craft are all crazy,' Byron argued. 'Some are affected by gaiety, others by melancholy, but all are more or less touched.'

Modern studies on still-living writers show the same kind of pattern. The neuroscientist Nancy Andreason investigated participants of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and established that the percentage of writers who fulfil the formal criteria of some type of mood disorder is almost three times higher than average. Whatever study I pick up, the results are more or less the same – from a statistical point of view being an 'artist' is simply a very dangerous profession, perhaps even more so than being a soldier or a snake handler.

How does this 'madness' translate itself into art?

I found that from a neurological perspective two different things are involved: flexibility and speed of thinking, and the ability to combine the resulting thoughts. People in a hypomanic state are outstanding in this respect. Hypomania is an intense, excited state of being which occasionally precedes mania. Nowadays this is sometimes called a 'flow'. People in a state of flow detach themselves mentally from their circumstances, from where they are, from time. If you scanned their cerebral activity, you'd see many new connections lighting up between the cortexes. People in a state of flow have a relatively large number of thoughts within a specific time-period, and those thoughts go faster, sometimes shooting out in all directions. People in a flow display an increased sensitivity for what others experience, and also for what they themselves think and experience. They are associative, quickly find the words they are searching for, and words that resemble them; they experience an enormous freedom of thoughts. They're not concerned with boundaries or categories, they're not searching for one specific answer or end point, they let themselves be guided by the adventure, by playfulness, by the flow. During this slightly chaotic state of mind, which usually lasts a few hours, there are continual collisions and cross-pollinations, between words, images, ideas, thoughts. And then, when the flow wears off, when the hypomania retreats, they come down to earth again, usually somewhat exhausted. And what if the flow doesn't work itself out, but instead increasingly intensifies? Then we call it mania. Or if delusions occur and order doesn't return at all, we speak of a psychosis.

What about the depressive periods? The melancholic or anxious ones? What is the point of these? These periods are calmer and don't bring much energy. The storm of ideas has died down and now is the time to put them in perspective. Instead of being over-confident, artists who are melancholic, depressed or anxious are actually afraid of underperforming, and of what

others may think: they're in a state of doubt. Their carefulness and their fear serve to shield them from making mistakes. The artist who is melancholic, depressed or anxious reviews their life and so can draw on countless numbers of difficult periods that are normally pushed aside or repressed.

Michael is also a melancholic, although the term would probably not occur to him.

His thinking follows different patterns than that of most, he ascribes new meanings to words – his vocabulary original, and mysterious to many. I would argue that he experiences the world in profoundly different ways than we do. But then again, how can I be sure of that? One hint is that Michael seems to attribute meaning to experiences in different ways than most of us. For example, he rarely thinks about the fact that he was raped when he was seventeen. It started in the playground. A man approached him. He invited Michael back to his flat and once there ordered him to take off his trousers. Out of the corner of his eye Michael saw a hammer on the sideboard. He hesitated a moment, but his dislike of violence overcame his anger. He did nothing. That anger dissolved when the man was sentenced and ended up in jail. (Fear 51 on his list: the fear of sexual abuse.) Then for Michael everything was resolved; according to his system things were now okay. But he can suddenly get very upset when he thinks about someone who refused to sit next to him in the bus the other day. The fact that some years ago his parents died shortly after each other, affects him less than the memory of someone he thought of as a friend saying something mean to him in 1992 – after all, parents always die, that was the agreement, but his friend had betrayed him.

Something similar applies to his fears: his developmental disability means that they all carry equal weight. Fear number 50 (fear of being spanked by a school teacher who has got your parents' permission to do so) is just as terrifying as number 27 (fear of getting left alone). 53 (fear of bats) hurts just as much as 57 (fear of being different). And 87 (fear of getting hugged) is just as difficult to shift as 98 (fear of people who are scared of Michael).

It is precisely the absence of any kind of hierarchy that makes his list of fears so powerful. It demonstrates in a disarming way how many 'dangers' surround us daily, how arbitrary our distinction between 'real' and 'unfounded' fears actually is, and how fragile our sense of security. His most dominant fear this week: that the pot pie he eats for breakfast – a palish kind of chicken puff – will burn away his guts, and that the television will fall over and slay him with a blast of electricity. The expression 'never a dull moment' never seemed to apply to an individual as much as to Michael Bernard Loggins.

A big difference between the artists described above and Michael is that he doesn't feel fear has brought him anything good. During our second meeting I try to convince him that without his fears he perhaps wouldn't have written or drawn anything, and in any case, he wouldn't

have made his book of fears – fear as a curse and a source of inspiration. Michael shrugs his shoulders.

Can he remember a single day he wasn't afraid?

He shakes his head. And if he wasn't scared, then he was anticipating being scared, and that meant he was always over-alert and agitated, and that he felt insecure and unsafe.

So where does this fear reside physically?

He clasps his belly. 'In Michael Bernard Loggins' gut.'

What is fear to him?

'Fear is like a car coming straight at you and you can't stop it, and you can't step aside either, and you're probably wearing the wrong kind of shoes, and so you fall. You're always falling.'

Why did he decide at the time to write down all his fears?

'To understand what they mean. What fear can do to you. You got to understand fear and learn from it. Otherwise, you hurt other people. There's no other way. You can try to hide fear, like a dog hides a bone. But then someone else finds the bone, and he'll beat you with it.'

At the end of our third meeting – 45s + cheeseburger + fries – I hand Munch's print over to Michael. In 'Anxiety' there's a ghostly group of figures, on the famous path depicted in 'The Scream'. The sky is billowing red. 'This looks happy,' Michael says to my surprise. 'Lots of colour, happy and laughter. But a bit lonely. I like it. Who made it?'

Edvard Munch, I say.

'Ed?'

'Okay, Ed then.'

'Perhaps Ed will like my words too.' Michael, it turns out, also has a gift for me: a new word, on a card made of cardboard, written in his moving and utterly clear handwriting. The word is 'disminsh', which I understand to be a variant of 'diminish'. The meaning, according to Michael, is 'that the pain vanishes. Or you hope it'll be less painful, less discomfort, feeling less bad and horrible. Otherwise, the pain is too unbearable, or too deep, all rolled up in blankets.' Perhaps, he suggests, I could show it to my friends, or to Ed. Would Ed like it?

During our fourth and last meeting – 45s + cheeseburger + fries + Fanta orange – I ask if he will ever make another book. He shakes his head firmly. He finds it too difficult, that publishing business. 'People asked all kinds of questions, why I did this, why I didn't do that. They were snobby. They made Michael Bernard Loggins nervous and scared. As if I'd done something wrong. Michael Bernard Loggins just did what he had to do.' So all there will be in the coming years is individual notes, like the thousands already scattered around the apartment, written on jotters, paper napkins, chicken puff packs. Just as suddenly as it started, the public part of Michael's life came to an end. The fear-writer is afraid of publishing. But for

my sake he does dive into a garbage bag, full of the paper napkins and scraps of paper he has covered in writing. ‘You give gifts. I give gifts,’ he says. Then he looks at me insistently and asks if I’ll miss Michael Bernard Loggins. I say I will and ask if Michael Bernard Loggins will miss Daan Heerma van Voss. He shuts his eyes and nods. We say goodbye by not saying goodbye, by not using fancy words, by keeping quiet and nodding.

When I leave Michael’s apartment I still don’t know exactly how he fits into the story of fear and creativity. Perhaps we should return to Aristotle, with his unique ratio between black bile and the other bodily humours, a theory that was supposed to clarify the singular nature of the melancholic. Although the doctrine of the four humours has been repudiated, we can perhaps draw something from it still. The balance between sensitivity and over-sensitivity, between seeing something no one else sees and hallucinations, between being aware of others and paranoia, between being stimulated by fear and being paralyzed by it, is easy to disturb. But for many it is crucial to the creative process. There are, therefore, two factors to bear in mind: a certain amount of melancholy, and balance.

Let’s first take melancholy, or madness, or fear. And let’s replace all those terms with another concept: feeling out of place. It is what all artists reviewed here have in common. From this arose the need to ‘tame the world’, to find a way they could relate to life, because that wasn’t self-evident. That made them feel the need to create something that didn’t yet exist, to display themselves in an original, artistic fashion. In the course of time melancholy and anxiety have ensured that millions of people who felt out of place, who felt like outsiders, who couldn’t express themselves in traditional ways, who were in search of the meaning of life, started to paint, write, make films or sing.

What are artists? According to the writer Tim Parks they are people who have never found a stable position between the poles of ‘fear’ and ‘courage’, oscillating between the two in perpetuity. The navigating of that instability, that is the motor behind their art. Where I am on the Scale of Parks is hard to say. But if I’d felt completely at home in the world, if I’d never had to ask myself why I seemed to see or feel differently than my childhood friends, if I’d never been seized by something I couldn’t grasp or explain – I would have stopped long ago, my notebooks would have remained empty, and this book wouldn’t have been written – I know that for sure. In other words, feeling different, out of place, instable, hasn’t only been a source of anxiety or fear, but a driving force as well.

This ‘being feeling out of place’, this impossibility of finding a stable position on the fear-courage spectrum, has little to do with the quality of the artwork in question. That’s a romantic cliché, the result of a major historical bias in the history of madness and art. Only those who made it have been investigated: the eminent writers and major poets and world-famous artists, those, moreover, who sang the praises of melancholy and fear as the source of their inspiration.

The poets and artists we no longer know about, who had no biographers, whose contemporaries did not make note of them, whose work we have to search for instead of them being republished as classics, have been condemned to oblivion. Yet there is no reason to suppose that this second rank was less ‘crazy’ than the first. I don’t see much point in this qualitative approach to madness. Some of those who felt different created masterpieces, others wrote down their fears on hand-stapled mimeographs. Some achieve worldwide renown, others are afraid that Douglas will eat up their favourite noodles. Some enjoy being celebrated, others retreat. But when they’re creating, generally, they feel like real people.

It makes sense, then, that they can feel fundamentally lost when their need to tame the world is frustrated. The psychiatrist Jan Swinkels once told me about a young painter he had treated: Ivo, a Rietveld Academy student of nineteen or twenty. Ivo had become psychotic and was extremely anxious. ‘Painting was Ivo’s vocation. I gave him medication, but kept the dose very low. Because if I gave him too much, he couldn’t paint anymore, and then he lost the only way he could connect to the world. That was why he created this one painting of a starry sky, with his mother’s head in the foreground, with a hole in it. He’d put himself in the painting too, standing beside her, with a shovel. But not long after completing the painting, he ended up with a very severe psychosis, at the same time that I was on holiday. He was admitted into a clinic, and they didn’t talk to him, because he was classified as psychotic. He was stuffed full of pills. I got a phone call at my holiday address: Ivo had jumped in front of a train. His parents gave me the painting as a present. It hangs in my study. I look at it every day. Then I stare at that starry sky, and at the brain, and I see a strong similarity between them: both the universe and the brain are infinite – you can fall inside them and never land. Art is situated in that largely unknown borderland between biology and psychology. Art provides us with the purest image of what it means to be human. But that purity has its price.’

That brings us to the second factor: balance. Most of the Romantic poets were aware of their ‘madness’, their melancholy and their fear, and they could therefore see when they were about to lose contact with reality. They had a certain degree of control and when they got lost inside melancholy, they usually managed to find their way back, with a new pile of poems as their prize. In other words, they kept an eye on balance. And then there’s Michael, who barely has control over his fears. That’s why you won’t hear Michael praising or celebrating his fears; he can never switch them off; in his case it’s a question of sitting them out. His fears lead him. He follows and keeps the tally.

Half a day before I fly back from California to Amsterdam, I read Michael’s list of fears again. Fear number 138: ‘Fear of Jumping off the Bridge way up high going down real deep splash in that Deepest water and take your own Life away From yourself. You’ll Jump from top ledge.’ On that last afternoon in San Francisco, I walk across the Golden Gate Bridge in the company

of Kevin Briggs, a former police officer who patrolled here for twenty years. I recently approached him with this request, after having read various things about the history of the bridge. Since the bridge opened in 1937 more than 1,600 people have jumped off it – people come from all over the world to step onto the bridge and never return. Every ten days someone sets foot on the bridge with the intention of never going back.

We set off on the footpath at the side of the 2.8 kilometre long bridge, which today is half invisible because of the fog, giving our walk a dream-like atmosphere. ‘I see a different bridge to you,’ Kevin says. ‘I see people and car crashes, ghosts that no one would recognize and accidents no one remembers.’ The traffic rushes by, the mesh fence rattles in the gusts of wind, you can barely hear each other speak; it’s cold and chilly – both our noses are running incessantly. Kevin himself has had to deal with about two hundred people who stood on the edge. Fearful, desperate people, ready to jump. He was the one who tried to change their minds. Their conversations were always about fear. Fear of losing face, fear of an uncertain future, fear of disappointing others, the fear of not being able to make yourself understood. That last one especially, according to Kevin, carries a lot of weight. ‘People need a way to connect. Directly, or via a side route.’ One such possible side route is art. Kevin still remembers Jason very well, a calm and polite thirty-two-year-old. ‘Nothing in the way he behaved indicated panic or confusion. He apologized in advance for what he was about to do. Jason was very smart and sensitive, and incredibly talented, his parents told me later. He wrote books that he couldn’t get published. He wasn’t in a position to express his difference. He became frustrated; every hope of connection he’d once cherished, had changed into pain.’

Back home again in the Netherlands I place the little pieces of paper and card Michael gave me onto my desk. There’s a note from my girlfriend there as well, from long ago, long before she sent me on this journey. In her swift, italic handwriting she says that she loves me, and that I needn’t be afraid.