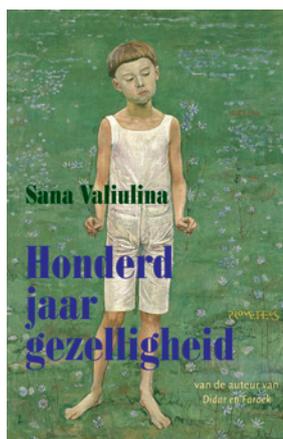


*A masterly quest for purity*

Sana Valiulina

## A Hundred Years of Conviviality



**A**FTER HER EPIC NOVEL, *Didar and Faruk* – nominated for the Libris Literature Prize 2007 – set in Stalinist Russia during the Second World War, the Estonian-Tatar author, Sana Valiulina, meticulously dismembers Dutch society which, in her opinion, is bursting at the seams in these overheated times.

Roland Warmer, a scion of a prosperous family and recipient of an excellent education, decides to seek significance and salvation in this prosaic society. The grotesque quest for the ‘truth’ begins literally at the bottom. On the principle that ‘per merdam

ad astra’ (from faeces to the stars), Roland applies for a job with the municipal cleaning department in the most squalid and dangerous part of the city.

He ends up in a colourful environment, populated by an impressive group of outcasts: the boys from the cleaning department with their simple pleasures; an improbably fetid, raving female vagabond, and the queen of the waste, who has a fascination for excrement. All watch in astonishment as Roland enthusiastically pounces upon the filthiest jobs, driven by his will to make sacrifices.

As he tirelessly disposes of the world’s waste like a modern Sisyphus, he begins to metamorphosize. His transformation continues when, during a short holiday, he falls into the hands of a shamanistic eccentric who gives him hallucogenic seaweed juice. Once he returns to the garbage zone, it seems like Roland’s pursuit of purity has yielded nothing at all. It is only when he becomes unintentionally mixed up in the murder of a Pole and is forced to look after the filthy female addict that he can do anything of genuine significance: ‘By saving one person, you have actually saved the entire world.’ But once again it turns out that the world is not exactly grateful for his help. *Honderd jaar gezelligheid* (A Hundred Years of Conviviality) can be justly described as a book of our time. Valiulina’s outrageous imagination radiates from every page and she refers with light-footed ease to world literature. Together with its effervescent and original tone, this makes the novel an unforgettable reading experience.



photo Otto Snoek

Sana Valiulina (b. 1964) grew up in Tallinn, Estonia. After studying Norwegian Language and Literature in Moscow, she emigrated to the Netherlands. She made her debut in 2000 with the semi-autobiographical and much-discussed novel, *Het kruis* (The Cross), about life in a Moscow student flat. This was followed in 2002 by the novella collection *Vanuit nergens met liefde* (From Nowhere with Love). Her breakthrough came in 2006 with the epic *Didar and Faruk*, which is based upon her parents’s life during Stalin’s reign of terror. The novel was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize.

*Holds up a mirror to present-day Dutch society.*  
NEDERLANDS DAGBLAD

*Honderd jaar gezelligheid is primarily a book about the desperation of Dutch society in 2010.*  
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Sample Translation

*A Hundred Years of Conviviality*

(Honderd jaar gezelligheid)

by Sana Valiulina

(Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2010)

Translated by Paul Vincent

I

Per merdas ad astra

(Through Shit to the Stars)

‘Everybody else was “they”. “They” who understood nothing and saw nothing. “What?” said Bavink, “God? You talk about God? Their hot dinner is their God.”

NESCIO, *Little Titans*

Recently Roland Warmer had ceased to recognise himself. A stranger, bearing *his* impenetrable blond head on *his* rugged shoulders stared out at him from the mirror.

Not long before he'd asked his mother who that boy in the photo was with the orange cap and the fishing rod, the stern expression and the lips pressed implacably together.

His mother fluttered her eyelids and looked at him in alarm. A hasty brush of the lashes and her eyes were once more as bright as ever – as always when she doubted his sanity and was keen to hide it from herself. At this point he usually hit the roof, but now fear gripped his heart until all the rage had been squeezed out of it. He even tried to be nice to her when she flopped down a little too close to him with stacks of photo albums on her lap.

'This is in Sweden, you were five, look at those blond curls, you were a little brown-eyed angel back then, and here you're covered in mosquito bites, do you see the size of those Swedish lumps, at first we thought they were chicken pox, a real disaster, but apart from that an unforgettable, uplifting holiday. That red cottage, the drive a kilometre long, and do you remember, the deer that just loomed up out of that white night, silent and powerful, like the incarnation of a pagan god...'

Roland grunted, got up and asked if he could take the photos with him.

'All of them?'

'All of them.'

At home Roland studied them one by one; now and then he had to wipe his hands on his trousers, horrified at himself and those feeble dripping fingers. The sweat, the secretion of the sick world had been almost expelled by his mind, but was still in his pores.

He soon began to suspect that this was his next trial and instructed himself to suppress the hope that flared up each time he opened a new album. Yet he couldn't help it – among those hundreds of snaps there must be one in which he

would see himself instead of that little boy. Sometimes he pulled a photo out of a plastic sleeve and examined it close up.

In this one, for example, he must have been about fourteen. He was in year three. Roderick, Michiel, Christiaan, Niels and a few girls from 3C in short skirts, in the Vondel Park. He recognised everyone, including those who had left school shortly after and whom he had never seen again – everyone, except for the blond boy in the V-neck sweater.

Before he went to bed Roland put the albums into a bin liner. He couldn't bear the thought of having to look at them again the next day. Should he take them back to his mother, or throw them away? The sight of a bin liner the colour of a military body bag in which soldiers' remains were brought home from distant trouble spots, was reassuring, at least.

This trial seemed the cruellest so far, but that didn't automatically make it the most important, did it? Especially since it hadn't originated from him, not as *his* testament, but had been as it were sent to him, as if everything he had achieved up to now had found a response somewhere.

That night Roland woke up a few times, sweating and in tears, but the moment he opened his eyes the tears dried up. Still he must be vigilant, he thought, or before you know it you'll have your back to the wall again.

The next morning he knew he simply had to wait for the secret meaning of the trial to be revealed to him, so that his path would branch off in the right direction.

Soon afterwards the stranger had disappeared. One weekday morning, when Roland quickly glanced at the small mirror in the hall as he passed. He was already late for work but as a reflex couldn't help grabbing *his* nose, rubbing *his* lips, fluttering *his* eyelids, pinching *his* cheek hard, just like the stranger of whom all he could see was the head. Then he ran down the stairs, and as he frantically pedalled his bike it occurred to him that this showed great wisdom – revealing the message casually, in an unguarded moment, embedding it in the humdrum context of everyday life, lest any doubt should arise as to its viability. The old

world had lost its grip on him, he had sloughed off the past, he was becoming someone else.

Still, Roland avoided mirrors after that and he didn't feel quite at ease at home, to begin with at least, as if an uninvited guest had moved in with him. The mirror was now hanging turned to the wall, and Iris was the reason he didn't dispose of it.

Iris Petronilia, the daughter of the uncrowned queen of the realm of waste incineration and an Antillean dustman, so not lily-white but intelligent enough to hold her tongue at crucial moments, dropped in to see him once a week at the weekend, on her way to play PacaRabana on the computer. But before she abandoned herself to the fluorescent on-screen bites she had first to be filled up so as not to go to the club unsated, and so as to rise high above the yearning throng, as befits a princess.

From the start Iris grumbled at Roland for not having a bigger mirror in which she could survey herself from head to toe. But should he remove the gleaming piece of glass all hell would let loose, an unnecessary threat to their alliance.

True, Iris came from a time when his confusion was proportionate to the amorphousness of the world, but for now Roland wanted to keep her for the moment, and not just for reasons of hygiene. He'd known her for almost a year. The other day he had suddenly realised with a slight feeling of horror and most of all disbelief that that period had changed something in their relationship.

The straight, shortest line linking them, along which they moved towards each other, had blurred and shifted. Side paths appeared, detours, bifurcations, as if a new route were opening up between them, beyond the control of his will. The fact that besides faint contempt he felt a touch of tenderness for her disturbed him more than the bursts of sentimentality she occasionally awakened in him. Anyway, these upsurges of melancholy could be neutralised by logic. They were not so much related to Iris; rather they simply slipped into his room in her wake, like an agonising memory of the bonds and habits of his old life.

Was it that he did not want to lose Iris because he saw her after all as the last link with that world which he did not yet dare break, afraid that loneliness would become too much for him? He finally decided that despite his principles there was such a thing as necessary selectivity, and that Iris belonged to a section of his life's path that he still had to travel.

Although for the sake of his intellectual celibacy Roland had long since stopped immersing himself in individual female minds, he could see with the naked eye how different that one light-brown specimen was from the rest of the bipeds, and not just the female ones. That must be because of her smell. Someone who'd grown up on a rubbish dump was hard to intoxicate with violet, lavender or pine air-fresheners that the rotten world kept spraying itself with. No, Iris Petronilia wasn't falling for that, however flowery her name might be. She had only to sniff for a moment to smell the authentic, sickly-sweet odour of decomposition through that pungent artificial atmosphere.

Besides an infallible sense of smell, Iris possessed a strong will that drove her onward through life's wilderness. That will might be as blind as all those of her gender's, but with Iris it was informed by a degree of illumination. Though her will might never rise to transcendental heights, Roland reasoned, her aspiration was focused upwards and not downwards, where the laws of physiology would distort her core into a copulating, birth-giving, suckling, caring and ever-expanding creature, into a two-breasted Cerberus at the gate of the life cycle. Nor did Iris heed the blaring trumpets of the uniformed guard of well-toned bodies who built castles-in-the-air on the world's ruins in order to make a quick buck.

Her will, driven by her body's reactions, was constantly in flight from the stench of the putrid world, which in Iris's case was the best way to ensure her continued purity – which was, for Roland beyond dispute, insofar as the notion of purity applied to her, that is.

What a waste that she was tainted by Antillean original sin, Roland invariably thought, when Iris entered his house on Friday evening with a casual nod of the head, kicked her high heels off one at a time, and undressed in measured stages

she walked over to him. That businesslike approach continued to keep things clear between them. Sometimes she didn't deign to look at him but stood in the middle of the room peering thoughtfully around, looking for spots they had not yet inaugurated.

After a couple of hours she would call her cab, run her fingers for the last time through his still wet crew cut, yank it hard, bend over for a moment to give him a bite on the chin, and leave, without a word, until the following week.

Roland had to stifle the affection for Iris which was trying to cloud his mind, immediately, by introducing a thought deadline. As soon as she had gone, he threw himself back on the bed, alarm clock in his hands. He was allowed to think of Iris Petronilia for exactly ten minutes, of her anointed skin, her fragrant curls, of the pulsating vein in her neck when she threw her head back as she sat rocking to and fro on top of him, of the powerful suction of her body, and also of what a crying shame it was that *he* hadn't won her heart, but she had rescued him, a deed that in his universe carried equal weight, even though it had taken place in that rotten, amorphous period of his life when his contorted soul left its mark on every shiny surface.

The interview panel consisted of Mrs Lambrozius. Just as Roland lowered himself onto the chair facing her, a black man put his head round the door. 'Do you need me?'

Mrs Lambrozius waved him away. The black man disappeared again. The job interview with the sanitation department of the Amsterdam district with the wrong post code could begin.

'Well, and to what do we lowly public servants owe the honour?' said Mrs Lambrozius, surveying Roland from head to waist. 'You've finished a course of arts-based secondary education. And his lordship wants to be a dustman. An honourable occupation, I'm not disputing that, but I don't need to tell you that the average educational level of your future colleagues is somewhere around nursery school. Though... Romario almost had his NVQs in the bag when he felt he had

to go and commit a robbery, but things turned out OK: two kids with a teenage mum, who are heading for disaster.’

She leaned more heavily on her elbows, and shifted towards him across the desk. Her fleshy cleavage gleamed in the sunshine.

‘What brings you here, Roland Warmer? What is a sensitive youth like you looking for among our kind?’

‘Mrs Lambrozius, rest assured I shall do my best to keep your neighbourhood as clean as possible. I’m not frightened of getting my hands dirty, the cleanliness of this country means a lot to me.’

For a second he thought she was going to crack up, even though her imperturbable gaze didn’t falter.

‘All right,’ she said, ‘then I’ve no more questions, young man. I’ve every confidence in you, so to speak.’

She leaned back and tugged the pink jacket of her two-piece into shape. He noticed her long red nails, lots of gold jewellery on her fingers, a juicy red mouth and a ponytail that was far too short for her age. ‘Scale one, a three-month trial period, but first a medical. Ryan will show you the ropes, I’ll drop by on a regular basis, from Thursday you’ll be on the rota – we hate people who’re late. Good luck.’

Roland got up to shake hands with her, whereupon she swivelled round and walked languidly ahead of him to the door. High heels, black seamed stockings, a skirt that was a little too skimpy.

‘Actually,’ she said, turning back towards him, her hand already on the door handle ‘you can go a long way in waste collection these days, Roland, take it from me.’

As he cycled home with Mrs Lambrozius’s perfume still in his nostrils, he reflected on how smoothly it had gone and how he’d worried unnecessarily about the interview.

In the course of Roland's three-minute talk with his mother she burst into tears, then screamed that she would never give him up, charged out of the room to fetch his father, shouted that *he* had been a useless role model for his son, and when his father simply shrugged his shoulders and without looking at her grumbled that it was high time the boy finally got to know what real life was like, she flew at him in a rage, 'monster, wimp, shitbag', and bundled him out of the room, then groaned and wondered what she was going to tell everyone, accused Roland of high treason, screamed that she would always go on fighting for him, threatened suicide and phoned a psychologist she knew.

Roland only had to wait a moment in the cream-coloured room. He was just wondering what a pram was doing in this sober interior, when the door opened and a woman appeared with a baby in her arms, accompanied by his mother's psychologist friend.

'Well now, you must be Roland,' said Eduard Breedgeest. His luxuriant head of hair went well with his Bordeaux-coloured bow tie worn over an ample, sky-blue shirt. The woman shot Roland a hostile look as if she resented him seeing her tear-stained face. Eduard Breedgeest briefly squeezed the top of her arms, with a nod of assent. 'Hang in there, Liesbeth. See you next week. Bye, Ominé, see you next week.'

His put his arm round Roland's shoulders and steered him towards his office.

'Your mother was so upset, Roland, that my thought was: *this* can't wait.'

Eduard sat down at an oval table, quickly dived under it and re-emerged with a bottle in his hand. 'Five o'clock. There are the glasses.'

'Ominé?' Roland put a glass on the table and sat down opposite the psychologist.

'Ominé, Kinoa, Amaranth, Daos,' chuckled Eduard. 'The new babies. You see, Wednesday is the baby session. Mature, highly educated, highly sensitive mothers and their offspring. Believe me, Roland, it's not easy. They give their babies the most exotic names, there mustn't be the slightest trace of the humble

clay on which they grew up. Their babies come from on high, their babies have chosen them from all those other mating couples and they mustn't under any circumstances be disappointed. It's pretty exhausting. For me too,' he took a sip, threw his head right back, gargled and swallowed noisily, 'all that talking, it gives you a sore throat. Oh Roland, my boy, you don't know what it's like consoling the inconsolable. They cry along with their babies so as to stay on the same emotional wavelength, they go without sleep to beat cot death, they become completely paralysed, since every step can go wrong and damage the emotional bond between them and their baby, they start hating their husbands for sometimes wanting to have it away when they've sworn eternal loyalty to their babies. Painful, but...', the psychologist suddenly leapt out of his chair, still with a glass of wine in his hand, the index finger of his other hand poised in the air, 'Eduard Breedgeest, who has not disowned the honest Dutch clay in which lie his roots, knows the answer! Back to the wellsprings! That's it! Forget about fake nature, young man, it's the wellsprings, the wellsprings!'

He paced excitedly about the room, then lowered himself into a white armchair as unexpectedly as he had got up, and snorted triumphantly. Could his mother, given her weakness for artistic men, have had a thing with him? 'Maybe a little less testosterone, darling,' Roland had once heard her say on the telephone. This Eduard wrote poems in his spare time. In them 'light' rhymed with 'sight', 'hands' with 'bands' and 'child' with 'wild'. They were the kind of poems where desire was invariably extinguished with sorrow, or vice versa, it didn't really matter that much, and where pain and joy alternated as regular as clockwork before they combined to conjure up sunshine from behind the clouds.

'Just you watch, young man. In a year's time I'll be starting a new project. "Green Childbirth"!'

He paused, giving Roland ample time to let the importance of his news sink in, or to register all its implications emotionally, in a manner of speaking. 'We're finally going to reinstate our wellsprings. Wellsprings plus farmers equals green

childbirth! Have you got it yet, Roland? No, I thought not...look for the joker, young man, well? Well?’

Glee spurted from the psychologist’s eyes, his hands waved encouragingly in the air from low to high as if scooping something up.

‘The farmers will rave about it. Beats building wigwams or sleeping in haystacks. No, no more quasi-spiritual fun and games for the benefit of the decadent city dweller, but a fundamental, essential contribution to our society in the shape of green birth clinics. That’s right! Have you got it now? It’ll be good for our farmers too. And then there are the politicians! Can you imagine their reactions? Over the top! The subsidy cornucopia will never run dry. Giving birth in a field! On clay! As our primeval mothers did! It’s for Muslim women too. Especially for Muslim women. Compulsory for Muslim women. So that soon all of us will emerge from a single primal spring and sally forth to meet the rising sun.’

Roland hadn’t noticed the precise moment at which Eduard Breedgeest had crawled back behind his desk, where he was now helping himself to the bottle. Drops of sweat glistened on his brow. ‘I’m sorry, Roland. This is the poet in me talking, Eduard the Unbridled. But let’s get down to business. If I understand things correctly, you’ve become a dustman?’

‘Operative of the municipal sanitation department, Eduard.’

‘Oh, young man, spare me that juggling with terms. A dustman is a dustman, from dust, dirt, filth, muck, stench, turd, shit, and that’s that. Let’s get one thing out of the way at once: this isn’t your vocation. So what is it? Puberty’s last fling? How old are you? You must be nearly nineteen. That’s too early for a quarter-life crisis! Or is it some stupid act of retaliation against your mother? Or a gesture of social protest? Anyway, why aren’t you drinking? I’ve got all sorts here – wine, beer, cognac, vodka, port, sherry, advocat, Tia Maria, Breezer, Bride’s Tears...’

‘No, thank you, I don’t drink.’

‘That’s not healthy, Roland, at your age, not healthy at all! Unleash the beast in yourself. Booze and screw. Now’s the time! The bestial phase is part of it. Be a real man. Puke, but booze. Celebrate the life! Pop and shoot up! Get your hand under every skirt that flutters past! Poke it right in there! Be a bad boy! Live! Let it rip! Get off your head! In a word, be yourself!’

To add force to his words the psychologist grabbed his bow tie, but the grand gesture with which he attempted this act of liberation was sabotaged by awkward fiddling. Goaded by Roland’s sarcastic look, he tugged at it with increasing impatience, and finally gave up, put his glass on the desk, unhooked the tie with both hands and flung it to the floor.

‘Wouldn’t my mother be pleased with a son like that!’ Roland observed.

‘Believe me, she’d have much less of a problem with that than with what you’re doing now.’ Eduard unbuttoned the collar of his shirt and rolled up his sleeves. ‘What you’re doing *now*, Roland, is to say the least not very cool, and what’s more it’s incomprehensible, tasteless, gross, absurd, totally out of step with the times and, forgive the cliché, an insult to everything your parents stand for and with them a host of other people like us.’

‘Exactly, people like us.’

‘Go ahead, make fun of it, young man, but remember one thing – at first you’ll be very lonely, and then very, very lonely, so lonely it’ll make you shiver, well, with a bit of luck you may get featured in *The Big Issue* as a lad from a good home on a quest, looking for salvation in waste disposal, and they’ll definitely think you’re a sad case, and certainly weird, so their sympathy won’t affect your fate in the slightest, and afterwards they’ll just forget you and no one will give a toss and you’ll become invisible, and so you’ll cease to exist, and can you handle that?’

But tell me, why don’t you just grab your rucksack and go round the world and get to know yourself? It’s what I did. It was invaluable for my personal growth and the enhancement of my personal wisdom, which I now want and am able to share with others, because I have it, you see. You could also try making yourself

useful for our less fortunate brothers in the developing world, that'd also be very helpful towards developing a positive self-image, and last but not least just as helpful for your CV. We mustn't lose sight of the future, even if it's too often refuted by the present. So what about your ideals and the suffering of the Third World, Roland? Can't you marry those two things constructively so that both can benefit?'

'I don't want to run away.'

'Sorry?'

'No time, Mr Breedgeest.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I'm out of time, I've got to go. I'm only here for my mother's sake. I really believe in family ties. Would you ask her to leave me alone, for now? Concoct a nice story, say I'm suffering from cognitive dissonance or some other disorder, but nothing too extreme, please.'

'Listen, Roland...'

'No, no, I must go now, I've listened long enough.' Ronald bent down and picked up the bow tie. 'Here, put this back on. You look naked without it.'

The Vondel Park was emptying, except for a few joggers. Even the couple who'd been busily snogging all that time left, unsteadily. Roland lay back full length, with the rustling leaves between him and the sky. He folded his hands under his head and peered upwards, intently until his eyes filled with tears. Above, up on high, the poisoned world caught its bad breath, bowled over by the pure, icy air. Strong winds blew and eagles soared, beyond the reach of the impure.

As it was starting to get cold Roland wrapped his arms around himself and listened to the earth. How moist it was and how fruitful, how powerfully and protectively its odours rose ever higher, through the cast iron of the bench, through his clothes and his skin directly towards his heart – he shrouded himself in its breath and closed his eyes. Between the generous earth and the perfect heaven was the decaying world, its face eaten away by cancer.

The world you were forced to live in not only stank, it no longer had a face! You couldn't even look at her, the bitch, without your own contorted mug constantly popping up in front of your nose.

We're defenceless against that other self, Roland knew. Those others, they've appropriated the world we've stripped clean, they've breathed new life into it. They've sprinkled that rotten world with the sweetest scent of musk and enveloped it in a mystical lustre so that even initiates start shivering and fall into a trance before it.

And then those others plant their wings in their emaciated backs, group themselves into eager squadrons and bellow 'To war!'

And here? No unity, no fire, just sterile chaos. People circling each other like blind snails. They carry their taboos on their backs and leave a thick trail of slime. They wallow in it and grunt in ecstasy like pigs, since it's their own slime, *their* excrement produced by their very own intestines, which they will defend to their last gasp against the other snails.

No certainty, no shape, except when it comes to modelling their own faeces.

I thought I was going mad. Everything you try to grasp turns to thin air, everything you try to hold on to shrinks and slips through your fingers. But now I know better... this slime, *their* slime, *their* shit is my salvation, my medicine, the magic glue with which I'll first stick myself together... then I'll hone my body and mind until they're as hard as diamonds...

A leaf fell on his nose, something was tickling the back of his neck – a stray ant, a ladybird? – Roland shook his head, scratched behind his ear but refused to let go of his vision. Until someone pressed a hand on his forehead. Roland started. There was a man right next to him on the bench. 'Keep your hands to yourself, you dirty old man!' he cried out, rubbing his forehead with his hand.

'Good morning, sensitive plant,' said the man. 'I'm really not a leper. I was simply worried. A good-looking lad, and all alone in the world. Perhaps he's ill, I thought, or he's hungry or sad, his girlfriend's given him the push, a pure blond lad like you, a rarity in Amsterdam, you must know what you're worth, da dum

da dum da dum, the supply's dropped off, the union's in despair, all we get are deliveries of brown, in all shades, it's true, but we demand lilywhite, our own blood and soil...'

When Roland reached the park exit he knew what he was going to do the very next day – have his blond curls cut off, as short as possible, he'd have preferred to be shaved bald, except it'd pigeonhole him with the skinheads. But first a shower, and scrub and scrub until the filthy breath of that overripe arse-licker was dissolved in the purifying Aveda steam, down to the last rancid molecule.

He was on his way to get a few more things from his house when he bumped into Christiaan.

'Hey, Rollo, I heard from your mother that you'd moved.'

'It was time to cut the cord.'

'Talking about cutting, you've changed, man, your curls – the girls will be inconsolable.'

'Then you'll just have to console them, Chris,' said Roland, 'but from the look of it you've not been idle yourself.' With thumb and index finger he tugged at Christiaan's shirt, and rubbed the material between his fingers. 'Indigo and you, who'd have thought it?'

'Black polo necks don't do it anymore, post-post-existentialism is passé, super-existentialism has gone down the tubes too, the world is one big crater, I buried all my sweaters in the garden. It felt like emancipation, the end of an era.'

'What next, Chris?'

In the six months since Roland had seen his friend, Chris seemed to have grown even taller, his head still further off the ground.

'I got very depressed afterwards.'

'After the sweater burning?'

'I'd almost forgotten that empathy was never your strong point.'

‘No, but seriously, Chris, wouldn’t burning have been even more symbolic, more cathartic. I mean, that half-hearted Christian palaver with worms in earth, matter rotting away under your feet. But my question was – what next?’

Christiaan had the half-affectionate, half-mocking look in his almond-shaped eyes with which he approached the naïve. And although Roland was only pretending to be naïve, he, Chris, was above it all, aided by his formidable intellectual baggage and his no less impressive sensitivity.

‘I got very depressed. A piece of matter in which I had placed part of my essence has gone for good. And yes, I cried. Anyway, why should I be ashamed of that? Because that’s how you build up your personal history, that’s how you get to know yourself in depth, that how you stem the advance of uniformity. Taking leave of your old self-image hurts, Rollo. Afterwards I became very introverted. For weeks I had trouble communicating. Even in the midst of a romantic rendezvous I would run away, I could no longer make contact at any level. That’s how I lost my great love.’ Chris paused and looked expectantly at Roland.

‘That too,’ said Roland, ‘didn’t she understand you then?’

Chris shook his head. ‘Sacrifices, Rollo, sacrifices, we have to make sacrifices.’

The hitherto dramatic tone of his story now gave way to complacency. The smoothness of this transition immediately removed any queries and doubts about this miraculous transformation. ‘Looking back, I view this crisis, this act of destruction as a necessary condition for the creation of a new category of consciousness. In short, it brings us back to your question, Rollo. What next?’ Christiaan scanned the street as if warning his potential listeners that this was only the prelude to what would follow. At the last moment he pulled himself together and said in a drawling tone: ‘Meta-existentialism.’

‘Which is?’

‘Metaphysical existentialism that transcends, goes beyond itself, the form of the human condition that unites the damaged, highly individual past – and to be

honest, Ronald, aren't we all damaged? – with the universal, indefinable and hence still pristine future. The present is constructed from this paradoxical quality of the merger of the highly personal past with the universal future. It's a revolution in consciousness, since our life is no more than the arbitrary sum of our needs, impulses, urges, fears, frustrations and conventions, of all those ingredients that make life hell for Western man, but a carefully balanced distillation of our personal histories driven by the vision of the as yet non-existent but for that very reason essential future, since with its universally valid force it forms the source of inspiration for our actions. We can free ourselves of emptiness by as it were transposing it to the future, where it will metamorphose into transcendent phenomena.'

'Smart thinking,' said Roland. 'From now on we launch all our sins into space at some obscure heavenly body, and Chris is your uncle. Haven't we been here before, saddling some poor scapegoat with everything under the sun that interferes with our convenience and there you go, good riddance to bad rubbish, on with the party.'

Chris shook his head pityingly. 'You just don't get it, and besides – that moral indignation, how provincial. Come on, Rollo, you're not some Mr Average from the sticks, are you? We're talking higher consciousness here. That view of life demands a certain intellectual baggage, which is why it's not for everybody, as you'll come to realise. Devotees of furniture malls who are wedded to the paltry pleasures of consumerism can obviously not be receptive to this refined form of catharsis.'

Right, thought Roland, he's showing his true colours. Thanatos, eros, catharsis – all in the right order, in an ascending line, high, higher, highest. Christiaan the giraffe, one eye still crying, the other searching for succulent leaves, he knows what he's entitled to, he won't go astray in the dark wood, his mouth is an infallible navigator.

'We're going to mount an exhibition to market meta-existentialism, and we may manage to set up a couple of media events, we've got the impact, now we

need the backers. But how are things with you? What are you up to? Your mother was a bit vague.'

'I'm working for the sanitation department.'

'You've gone undercover.'

'As a scale-one dustman.'

'So you're working on an art project. What a brilliant idea! Definitely a first, Rollo, I take my hat off to you. Come on, man, you can be open with me, you know me, my lips are sealed.'

'I'm being complete open, Chris.' Roland felt almost sorry for his former classmate, as he stood there, blinking. 'I'm working as a dustman. And yes, I've been to see a psychologist.'

'For Christ's sake, Roland, why? What's got into you?'

'Someone has to do it. Or do you think all that rubbish we're drowning in will disappear of its own accord, or launch itself spontaneously into space? Anyway, didn't you just talk eloquently about making sacrifices? Well then... But on a different subject. Do you know where Roderick's got to?'

'About three months ago Michiel said he'd gone to Kuala Lumpur, a month later I heard he'd joined the navy, and last month someone saw him walking down the Weena in the middle of Rotterdam in a three-piece suit... At any rate their phone's been disconnected, according to my parents their place was up for sale, and Claartje seems to have vanished too.'

'Hm, well, I'll be off then, Chris. I've got to collect a few things.'

Roderick, one of the three nice lads, Roland's best friend. Old Roderick, a likeable, noisy, pompous bastard from a posh suburb of Amsterdam, known for its thriving social life, with whom Roland occasionally peed into canals at night. Father – boyish-looking consultant in something or other; mother – a sporty blonde, good-humoured, part-time primary teacher; sister Claartje – bright-eyed, cheerful, as friendly as a morning breeze in June.

When did the mess start? Somewhere in year five. No, the most important question was *who* did the mess start *with*? Of course, with Aklilu Dereza, the under-age asylum-seeker from Congo. Yes, Ronald knew, the mess began at the moment that this young *ama* – ‘*Ama*? You should have seen his balls, man, they hang down to his knees,’ said Roderick when you could already cut the tension outside the gate of their country house with a knife and none of those involved, except for that Aklilu that is, who was walking around as imperturbably as ever, was taking any trouble to keep up appearances, ‘that guy’s at least twenty-five’ – had first set foot in the light, high-ceilinged hall of Buitenlust, where the Rijnders family resided.

It was nothing short of a miracle that this guy with his wild hairdo, the sombre, dull gleam in his eyes beneath the dreadlocks, felt immediately at home. According to ‘just call me Hetty’ Mrs Rijnders, this lightning adaptation was due to the reiki principles that followed the remodelling of their house. ‘When the energy flows in a space are properly balanced, even the most traumatised souls thaw out, all their blocks are removed, the traumatised soul is released from its cage as it were and is once again able to flow freely.’

As she said this had she cast tender glances in the direction of the *ama*’s athletic ribcage across which stretched a rather tight T-shirt, Roland wondered, when Roderick told him about his mother. ‘I don’t recognise her anymore, Rollo,’ he complained, ‘you know, I’m not a Mummy’s boy, but when all’s said and done she’s one’s *mother*, and Claartje feels the same. And my father’s consultancy work seems to be taking up more and more time.’

Mrs Rijnders and Aklilu had met in the course of her voluntary teaching work as a Dutch teacher in an asylum-seekers’ centre near Hilversum. The pitiful, damaged boy whom she couldn’t stop talking about at home, turned out to be a muscular, gleaming black god. ‘Aklilu’s very shy,’ Hetty Rijnders whispered to her family as everyone sat down to eat that day. Between the dishes was a resplendent flat square vase into which the yellow roses were stuck, calyx and all. Aklilu’s diffidence did not in any way affect his eating habits. To the horror of

the vegetarian Claartje, the guest consumed nearly a kilo of meat. Rinus Rijnders, the father, went on smiling stiffly and rather apologetically, as if this undisguised virility across the table suddenly placed his own manhood in a different, *very* different and painful light. Hetty Rijnders fluttered to and fro between the dining room and the kitchen. Was it an illusion or had she really lost umpteen kilos in the few weeks since she'd taken Aklilu under her wing, thought Roland, who as Roderick's best friend had been invited to the introductory dinner. To put Aklilu more at ease and to give our young Dutch lads a taste of other cultures. 'Man, if you only knew,' Roderick told him later – since Aklilu's arrival he'd shown an unusual interest in his mother – 'the number of diets she tried, dozens! And nothing helped, till that *ama* came into the picture, and in no time she'd shrunk to half the size, and she didn't even realise.'

It will always be a mystery whether Aklilu felt at ease in the presence of his contemporaries – well, contemporaries, the whole age question would also remain a mystery, despite the many meals that would follow with or without Roland. And perhaps, thought Roland, the whole category of feeling at ease as opposed to not feeling at ease with all the emotional nuances in between simply didn't exist in that alien culture. Perhaps the behaviour of that culture was driven by completely different factors. Fact was, in any case, that Aklilu hadn't changed a bit since their first meeting, whereas after six months the Rijnders family began to exhibit all the symptoms of a serious crisis.

But when they first met everything was hunky dory, and everyone did their best to ensure that interaction between the two cultures went as smoothly as possible. Aklilu wasn't all that communicative, 'it's because of his shyness and the language barrier,' repeated Mrs Rijnders. Two years' primary school, the nearest well ten kilometres uphill, armed gangs, an orphan trying his luck in the city, 'what about your brothers and sisters?' 'lupus, everybody dead'.

'He has a complete block,' explained Hetty when Aklilu went to the toilet, 'he's experienced such terrible things that he's died inside. In the Naturalisation

Department they don't believe him because he stutters too much. And in interviews he clams up. He's proud.'

When Aklilu was gone a long time, Hetty went to look for him. 'He can't have fainted, can he?' She found him in the ironing room on the top floor. The planned guided tour proved unnecessary, since Aklilu had already inspected the whole house. 'How sweet and how wise,' chuckled Hetty, 'it just has to be an African tradition. They must first familiarise themselves with unknown territory, for reasons of safety. Now he knows there are no enemies here, he can give us his full trust.'

His full trust. Roderick told Roland about bumping into Aklilu all over the house: in his parents' bedroom, in Mr Rijnders' study, in the wardrobe. He often slept over too, against all the rules, but Hetty Rijnders would ring the centre and say that Aklilu was ill. 'She'd never lie for us,' said Roderick, 'never.'

Aklilu was everywhere: no sooner had you found him in the loft than he was back sitting on his haunches in the wine cellar again staring at the beams; you'd only just spied his figure on the landing between the third and fourth floors, when you stepped into his shadow by the conservatory on the ground floor, and hadn't he just been sitting in the den when you bumped into him in the kitchen?

'It's as if our house no longer has any walls or ceilings he can't walk right through,' said Roderick, 'I'm starting to find it spooky. He can suddenly pop up behind you without a sound, you can't hear a thing because he walks barefoot. The other day he simply appeared behind Claar as she was undoing her bra, and do you know what the creep said when Claartje yelled at him and told him to push off and not come wandering into her room? "Don't ever talk to me like this, Miss Claartje, you are not the boss in this house," and something else about my mother and respect for one's parents, and no trace of a stutter. Claar in tears. And what does my mother do? She says something like "Well, Aklilu has given us his absolute trust, and we must do the same, end of conversation", no man, I ask you, what sense does that make, eh? What? Claartje goes to her father, who says I'll talk to that Aklilu, well, he still hasn't done it, but I ask you man, should I hire a

couple of goat-fuckers to rip the guy's balls off, man, I can't bear the thought of that caveman on top of my mother.'

For Roderick screwing was the beginning and end of it all. Aklilu was screwing Hetty Rijnders, Roland didn't doubt that for a second, especially every time he saw her tear-reddened, helpless eyes – she didn't even take the trouble to hide them from him: after all, he was a kind of member of the family – and her shrinking figure. Only half her face, once so rosy with health, was left and that half was becoming ever more translucent, so that Roland finally had to avert his gaze, unable to bear the sight any longer. Once she burst into tears – the two of them happened to be alone in the kitchen. Claar was upstairs, these days Mr Rijnders didn't come home before midnight, Roderick was not back from hockey and Aklilu was out for a change, but he was no good to her: you don't bother the man who's fucking you with things that don't really matter – 'my family are abandoning me, I've never felt so lonely, Aklilu awakens something in me I didn't even know I... these feelings are new for me, I can't even put a name to them, but my family have abandoned me, they want him to go but I can't leave him to his fate, he needs me'.

He's fucking her, Roland was sure. That's how a woman looks who's been toppled and taken, mercilessly and at length. But he didn't fuck her in the organ designated for the purpose, definitely not. Anyone harbouring such vulgar thoughts was mistaken. No, the process was taking place at a higher level: Mrs Rijnders was being fucked in her *head*, in her brain, and those unflinching, ruthless thrusts finally reached her heart, which turned out to be empty despite the full life she led, a life like a crowded room where you couldn't budge an inch with all those clubs and meals and drinks parties and courses and acquaintances and plants and antique furniture and good works and nice boutiques.

That rediscovered heart that couldn't resist the huge thrusting power kept bursting asunder and weeping for itself, but as soon as it had healed slightly had had to be torn apart again in order to forget the emptiness. Hetty Rijnders *wanted* to be taken, the yearning in her eyes that had joined the despair was

unmistakable, and that was what Roland found worst of all. True, Aklilu needed her – she corresponded with and talked to the Naturalisation Service, she argued with the staff of the asylum-seekers' centre, she conferred with immigration rights lawyers, she taught Aklilu Dutch, she bought new clothes for him, but didn't she need him just as badly, this imperturbable foreigner, who was the only one able to make her heart explode and hence provided her with a dubious but all the more tangible *raison d'être*?

By this time Roland and Roderick were in year six. It was time to make plans for the future, the school-leaving exams were drawing ever closer, but there was still no reasoning with Mrs Rijnders. She had resigned from her job, so as to be able to devote herself fully to Aklilu. Doubts had arisen regarding his papers. And his under-age status had also suddenly ceased to inspire confidence in the immigration authorities. 'He mustn't under any circumstances be sent back home, I won't let those bastards send him straight to his death,' said Hetty Rijnders.

She glowed again like she had when she first met Aklilu. 'If necessary we can hide him here. Then we can finally put this space to good use' and 'in the war my granddad had people hiding in the house'.

People hadn't sat down together to eat in Buitenlust for ages, except for those two in the kitchen that is, Roderick told him, no one visited and there were no more parties. Then came the explosion, just after Mr Rijnders had been away on a trip for a week. 'He came back a different person. I've never seen him so emaciated or so decisive.'

Three weeks later Aklilu was taken to Schiphol. In fact the whole explosion took place in secret and at a safe distance from Buitenlust. Whether and to what extent Aklilu put up any resistance during his deportation also remained uncertain.

Little by little life resumed its old familiar form, the first crocuses brightened the washed-out grounds, the trunks of the trees shook off their winter stiffness and swelled, the windows and doors of Buitenlust were being thoroughly cleaned in order to allow in as much as possible of the new, virgin spring light, when the

truth about the Aklilu affair leaked out and Hetty Rijnders attacked her husband with a letter opener.

Christiaan's mother, who knew Mr Rijnders' sister, revealed that Mr Rijnders had given a Congolese asylum-seeker money in exchange for a tale about Aklilu Dereza participating in the plundering and raping expeditions in Eastern Congo. In order to save his family, and who can blame him? And Roland's father paraphrased Aristotle. 'It's not about what actually happened but what might have happened according to the law of probability or necessity.' Since no one would ever find out what the *ama* had got up to in his country of origin, his argument continued, the classical notion might not be entirely unfounded. Of course they were all fabrications that could not be proved, but wasn't that just as true of the opposite? What's more, it appears that Congolese number two stuck to his story, he had wanted to reveal the truth for ages, but didn't dare, until Mr Rijnders approached him. At any rate the whole affair provided enough material for speculation, not all of it favourable to Congolese number one.

Roland's mother was mainly curious as to where Mr Rijnders had found the gumption to undertake something like this. 'Thunderborn.' 'Thunderborn?' 'Thunderborn. No? Never heard of it? Really? Do keep up, Eva! Ria's done it, and Marc found it helpful too, and Anna and Natasha, and even Lex is thinking about doing it, you must know him, the eternal sceptic? Well then, Thunderborn. A really heavy-duty storm and shock therapy. Rebirth in five days. The secret is never to bottle anything up, everything must be out on the carpet, bottling stuff up just gives you cancer. You have to turn yourself literally inside out, and - get this! - in public, in the presence of hundreds of other participants. The treatment's mega-hard, none of that couch or other soft stuff, but five days on bread and water. And it works! Look at Rinus.' Christiaan's father took over the baton. 'Of course, you may quite legitimately ask yourself whether what Rinus did is acceptable, but that's a different story, he had to save his family after all, didn't he? But the fact is - it works. Without Thunderborn he would never have taken

action and the mind boggles at the thought of what then would have happened in Buitenlust.’

Roland’s father of course couldn’t resist mentioning that a menopausal woman is capable of the craziest behaviour, whereupon he was attacked by his wife and Christiaan’s mother, who called him a dirty sexist and told him to put his hand in his own fly – how was his male menopause going? – but that made no impression on him at all, since he liked projecting the image of a dirty sexist and freethinker, averse to all kinds of political correctness. The conversation babbled on endlessly, about the influence of chemical processes on human behaviour and whether, taking this into consideration, we could still afford to use the term free will and also about how rumours were circulating that Hetty Rijnders had left in pursuit of Aklilu, and everyone hoped fervently that she had at least remembered to have all inoculations needed.

Who had the mess started with, Roland wondered, thinking again of Roderick, who after his school-leaving exams seemed to have vanished without trace. The last time Roland had been to Buitenlust an unknown woman had opened the door and said that she was house-sitting. ‘No, he left no address or telephone number, all communication is through an intermediary.’ Niels, with whom Roderick was going to study law in Leiden, hadn’t heard a word from him either.

Roderick started to seem more and more like a missing person, sighted simultaneously by several people in different locations. As time went on, he splittled off from his medium, a cheerful, uncomplicated, impudent guy who could down litres of beer and bang on for hours about the curves of girls who played hockey, so cruelly obscured from view by the puritanical length of their skirts, and began to sound more and more unreal, and more mystical, like the name of the umpteenth newly-discovered asteroid, which was too many light years away from earth to create any emotional response.

No, Roland’s father could drone on about oestrogen till he was blue in the face, but the crisis at the Rijnders’ place was not chemically induced. The mess

really had started with Aklilu, though contrary to what most people thought, only apparently. Because, strictly speaking, what had the *ama* done, except be there? Yes, he was just there, and he was just as he was and became, an African asylum-seeker, with all his horror stories, imaginary or otherwise, his papers, forged or otherwise and his traumas, feigned or otherwise. Right then, necessity or probability. No, ultimately Aklilu had done little that was reprehensible, Ronald was sure, Aklilu remained in the place he had been assigned, his behaviour was consistent with the nature of his race, but he kept quite properly to the rules of the game, by which the Western world organised *his* salvation, until Hetty Rijnders had overstepped the mark and offered herself to him, so that without moving a muscle he had started screwing her. It was not he, but she who had died inside and the only way of bringing her back to life turned out to be the orgiastic thrusts of that drawling black prince. They were her own private salvation, which she could find nowhere else, her life in and around Buitenlust was already a paradise and way beyond salvation. Until Aklilu had appeared.

To think that a European, Germanic woman could fall so deep. Was it emptiness, boredom, satiety that led to the stifling of all the feeling that nourished your soul, until it eventually died of starvation? Starvation through satiety! Though spiritual obesity! Was that Aklilu perhaps a kind of reincarnation of that soul, a black reincarnation, it's true, reminding her of something she thought she had never known? And what about her husband and her children, those other dwellers in paradise? Were their bodies as orphaned as hers, so that they passed each other by like blind people? So what linked them? Only what was visible and of use to their paradise? Or what constituted a threat to it?

There was nothing divine about the filth that spewed from paradise. It was dirty, stinking slime that mingled with the other excreta on the rubbish dump the world had become, which was now growing before one's eyes. Pyramids of waste – those were the monuments that modern Europeans, in a concerted effort, were rapidly erecting. No expense or effort was spared in making this incontestable proof of their unity tower over all European horizons.