FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Turntable

Tom Lanoye

An extract pp 9-21; 241; 244-251; 259-260; 268-278; 346-350; 355-358

Original title De draaischijf
Publisher Prometheus, 2022
Translation Dutch into English
Translator Jonathan Reeder

p 9-20

Het Schoonselhof (prelude)

I.1

I had envisioned the day they bury me quite differently. If I could have staged it myself, then I would have been—as our mother tongue so aptly puts it—"laid to earth" under a steel-blue sky, mid-winter. It is frigid but surprisingly sunny. Cloudless, except for the slowly broadening contrail of a wayward fighter jet.

The turnout is massive but hushed. From a distance comes the bark of a yapping dog and the drone of an unseen motorway. Perhaps the one to Willebroek and Brussels. But there's no escaping that drone. It is the basso continuo of these overbuilt, resolutely industrious parts. We'd rather work ourselves to death than brood over things.

Which is how I lived, too. Except for the last twelve years. Then the brooding took over.

The field of honour, occupied by other deceased notables, is clean and kempt. Well signposted and spruced up where necessary. Most of the gravestones have had a recent scrub, and here and there lies an iced-over bouquet. A little group of crows disputes over the few square meters between the graves of two former senators. Cawing as though they're cursing. Wouldn't it be nice if a rare songbird suddenly chimed in with his finest melody. From a weeping willow, where he has sought refuge rather than flee to Africa with his fellow migrants. He alone has stayed behind. Against his nature, and against his better judgement.

The beauty of his song ever so briefly lightens the oppressive, overly sacred atmosphere. But as soon as the creature stops, that mood returns. That awkward, wordless silence with which our folk has learned to endure its losses. Our people have no use for fuss or for wailing, hired mourners. We express our grief by showing it as little as possible. A chagrined grimace is enough. Oblivion will do the rest.

The mourners have all come on foot, unhurriedly, along the broad lanes of our distinguished necropolis. Some have stood waiting for a good half-hour at my freshly dug pit. Outwardly indifferent, but paler than usual. The only bustle is amongst the press photographers. They drop to

one knee, then just as quickly stand back up. One lies down on his back for a more dynamic perspective. Everyone ignores them, even the numerous dignitaries.

They stand shoulder to shoulder with their constituents. Average-Joe civilians, from blue-collar to bourgeois, rounded out with a smattering of tourists. They all squint in the blazing sunlight.

I notice with satisfaction how many women have taken the trouble to attend my send-off. They are of all ages and sizes; they are dressed in stylish black and modestly made-up. Their handbags contain, just in case, more tissues than usual.

And what do you know, a sizeable delegation has come down from The Hague by touring car, and a surprising number of my local confrères have shown up as well. Young and old, friend and foe. This is not a tradition in what one calls our "theatre landscape." Each generation ruthlessly abandons the previous one, replacing it at every echelon. Even one of my frequent critics has pitched up. He does keep rather to himself. A pariah at the wedding of the maharaja.

My most loyal comrades—those from the very beginning, members of the company that bore my name—have the darkest circles under their eyes. They surreptitiously pass hip flasks among themselves, I suspect of lemon jenever, in my honour. One of them—for years, my favourite *jeune premier* until he got too fat and bald for any roles except Falstaff or the Hypochondriac—snivels quietly into a plaid handkerchief. Discreet and yet showy. To be seen is to exist.

I forgive him. As the French say, "*un acteur est aussi une actrice.*" The biggest divas I ever directed were all men, even the ones who didn't fancy men.

It's a long wait. Our funerals are like this. Those without gloves blow into their hands. Others cough the cold out. The mourners' little clouds of breath prove that they, at least, are still alive. As opposed to the poor sucker who is now, at last, carried to his final resting place by four uniformed yet peasantish pallbearers. Aside from my remains, they all bear an oversized *kepi*. Hollanders—Hagenaars most of all—speak erroneously of a *shako*. The shako is of Hungarian origin, cylindrical, and adorned with braids made of gold or silver thread. Perfect for operetta. These caps are more like Soviet army hand-me-downs.

The quartet proceeds more solemnly than necessary. The earnestness of the amateur is always a touching sight. One of them must be a Turk, another has Indonesian features. Their difference in height means my casket—quality wood, high-gloss black finish—wobbles like a sloop at the lip of a waterfall. They nevertheless keep their gaze fixed straight ahead, as if hypnotized.

Behind them, the horses of the open hearse whinny softly. They stomp gently and toss back their head, causing the bells on their plumed regalia to jingle. The ad hoc marching band—consisting only of wind players, a few drummers, and some poor wretch lugging a xylophone—sees this as a sign and enters, *en sourdine*, with a funeral dirge. Not that tired old warhorse by Frédéric Chopin. The firm one by Ludwig van Beethoven.

People humbly listen, or pretend to. The mayor, his eyes shut, quietly lips through the speech he will shortly, at the edge of my pit, recite as though he has improvised the words on the spot. "A great loss for Antwerp and all its lovers of the arts." "A blow to Flemish cultural life." "An example to our rising stars."

Or no, pardon... on second thought I'll have Chopin's *marche funèbre* after all. My comrades-in-arts will take the hint. Winking and smirking at one another they will—barely comprehensible, more humming than enunciating—they will sing the version we so often broke into after lavish premieres or patched-up arguments. In the dead of night and usually until daybreak. Sometimes in our own backstage bar, but more often in Café Gounod, across from the emergency exit of our legendary but ramshackle theatre. Typical neoclassical granite baroquerie from the previous century. Its nickname "the Bourla" refers to its Parisian architect. Pierre Bruno Bourla, in the service of Napoleon's army,

became acquainted with the small metropolis where he would later become the manager of spectacular harbour works as well as its most celebrated urban architect.

His crown jewel, our theatre, was originally built as a temple for the *opéra comique* and its many aficionados among our French-speaking bourgeoisie. Red velvet, parquet floors, plenty of gilt. Later, my illustrious predecessors hijacked that temple for comedies and classics in mother tongue. Our marvellous, so often undervalued Dutch. With a Flemish twang, of course, and all too often with an overdone Antwerp accent—but why not? Dutch is Dutch, and Dutch is wonderful.

The only fatherland that never betrayed me is my mother tongue.

Mostly, though, our revelry took place on the Graanmarkt, the quadrangle behind our Bourla. Many a night we stood there under the tall trees, drunkenly arguing, teetering on the uneven cobblestones. Or slouched at tables outside café De Varkenspoot. Or on barstools at the counter of café De Duifkens, to insiders a.k.a. "Les Petits Pigeons." Or "our clubhouse," because the dingy walls above the wainscoting are adorned with portrait photos of ourselves and our dear departed colleagues.

That was our favourite place to belt out our paean, full-throated and heedless of the time of day. War or peace, carnival or strike, Whitsun or Easter, heat wave or Siberian frost: we sang Chopin's funeral march à la Flamande. We would repeat the last line, stomping our feet and pounding on the tabletop with both fists, never mind the toppling *bolleke* glass:

"He's… dead… and gone…
No… more gigs…
for him … at all…
What a sorry bugger!
What a sorry bugger!"[1]

1 There are different Flemish versions (of varying vulgarity and in assorted dialects) of this street/pub song, sung to the first theme from Chopin's Funeral March (Piano Sonata No. 2 in B-flat minor).

Alas. I will enjoy none of this. My burial takes place in a season that is neither fish nor fowl. Neither brutal winter nor idyllic summer nor colour-splashed autumn. A half-hour ago the sun peeked out tauntingly; now, the sky has gone grey again and is as formless as clay, and it's threatening to drizzle as only it can in these parts.

Oh, my God in Whom I do not believe: I beseech you, let it rain cats and dogs, as if announcing the flood. Let the hailstones clatter about us like miniature meteorites, bring on the hellish lightning and thunder. But do not let it just drizzle on my last day. I deserve the farewell of a hammer blow—no middling, diddling, lily-livered whimper.

In vain. The mist descends. Barely visible, barely palpable. And there is no speech. No one sniffles, no one passes a hip flask of lemon jenever, no one hums Chopin. For the simple reason that, aside from the two bone-bearers and a lone clerk, there's no one here. I'm plopped six feet under like an old stray dog. Perfunctorily, hastily. Without a headstone and in the cheapest coffin social services would fork out for, to at least grant me my last wish: burial, not cremation. An oblong chipboard box with a faux wood-grain finish. This is the vehicle in which I shall travel to meet my worms and my maggots. They even scrimped on the handles. Rope instead of brass.

Still, it's better than being burnt and scattered without a trace, like they did in the Middle Ages to heretics and anyone else who dared defy the status quo. Like that poor Joan of Arc. I once programmed George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, and during all-out wartime at that. Shaw was one of the legendary Anglo-Saxon playwrights then, but as an Irishman, citizen of a neutral nation, you could still get away with staging him. But as soon as the war tides turned, first in North Africa and, later, on the Eastern Front, Shaw the fervent socialist fell out of favour with our Militärverwaltung and its many paladins and lieutenants. I shrugged it off and staged him anyway. Some of the audience identified with the Joan in her heroic struggle against the occupier. Evening after evening, our Bourla was packed all the way to the third balcony, and we got ovations where Shaw probably never intended them.

The best plays, even those from antiquity, can benefit from the zeitgeist in which they are performed. Think of the thundering cheers for those closing lines spoken by the ghost of the rehabilitated St. Joan: "How long, Lord, until the world is ready to receive Thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"

The wartime alderman for Culture, to whom I owe—says he—my position as director, had "forgotten" to go to the premiere, nor did he show his face after that. Usually he attended four times. During the applause, he would wave from the royal box to friends and unknowns alike in the stalls, as though he had singlehandedly chosen and directed the play himself.

Our wartime alderman never chastised me directly for my *Saint Joan*. But I had it on good authority (one of his floozies, loose-lipped after two flutes of weak bubbly in the Capri dancehall) that he absolutely frothed at the mouth when he got wind of my programming. The dear child did quite a passable impression of his minutes-long rant, in coarse Antwerp dialect. All the more entertaining, him being a war alderman of Fine Arts whom they mocked behind his back because when in function he spoke with immaculate enunciation, stiffer than a Flemish nationalist schoolmaster. On the other hand, of course, she might have invented the whole thing just to flatter me. Fishing for an audition. All my life, I've had to be on my guard for this kind of manipulation. I have always been amazed how many people think they possess a talent for acting. While the way they volunteer it only proves the contrary.

Context aside, our *Saint Joan* was an artistic tour de force, though I do say so myself. Certainly considering the meagre means we had at our disposal. But in the end, I was unimpressed by Shaw's vision. Too indulgent of the bishops who helped send Joan to the stake, first by excommunicating her, and then by delivering her into the hands of her secular enemies. They even showed off her naked, half-burnt body to the masses. The debauched burghers of Rouen filed past by the hundreds. A family outing where ruffians could gawk at a witch's body that—"*parbleu!*"—turned out not to be horned or cloven-hooved at all, but simply a skinny, very dead girl. Only days later did they burn the rotting cadaver, and, in the dead of night, let masked henchmen strew it in Seine.

Never underestimate the vengeance of a wounded prominent, no matter his ilk. Not that I compare myself to that brave, unfortunate, silly girl. She was doubly incriminated and ostracized, being a female and barely more than a child. I am far guiltier than she ever was. On many counts. Except naïveté. I have never been able to claim such a thing. Who could? I have attempted and achieved much in my career; not everything went as it should, and not everything deserves sympathy in hindsight, let alone mercy.

But I did pay a price. More than many others.

But let's not exaggerate, either. The innocence of the maiden Joan bordered on foolishness and, according to some, on insanity. I have never believed, as she did, in military triumphs in the name of God, folk, or nation. I am a dyed-in-the-wool Fleming from the never-again-war generation. I was born and raised with the lessons of blood spilt on the Yser and Europe's trenches of '14-'18. A "righteous war"? That is a contradiction in terms.

Unlike La Pucelle, I have never listened to any voice but my own. And unlike Joan, I have never put myself out for kings or other authorities. Unless Schiller or Shakespeare wrote their monologs and ripostes.

In that case, no trouble was too great.

My two bone-bearers wear neither a Soviet cap nor a uniform. They are bareheaded and in worn-out overalls. The smaller of the two is nearly bald and is missing some of his teeth. The taller one has a cigarette butt jammed into the corner of his mouth. He squints his eyes into slits—not because of a sudden bout of tenderness, but to block out the cloud of nicotine emanating from his own nostrils.

It is assembly-line work, the way these two supernumeraries let out their ropes, lowering me into oblivion. Jerkily and helter-skelter. Only a mud puddle awaits me at the bottom of my new realm. The apparatchik from social services does not even look up, he stands under an umbrella reading a form on his clipboard. I would wager it's not even about me, but about the next burial.

Emissaries from The Hague are conspicuous by their absence. I cannot even accuse them of ill will. Most of the ones I worked with are either dead or demented. The rest of them lost track of me years ago. I left their few letters unanswered, out of bitterness, until no more letters came. Not a single line about me in the press. Up there in Holland, I'm more than forgotten: I've been erased. After everything I contributed and signified. Never count on the mental recall of a Hollander. His memory goes only as far back as the last balance sheet. The ingratitude is even greater in my hometown and the region that swirls around it like a dog turd. *De Standaard* gave me twenty lines without a photograph. *De Nieuwe Gazet* took advantage of the opportunity to drag me once again through the mud—half a page, but with more photos than text. Only *De Gazet van Antwerpen* and *'t Pallieterke* took the trouble to print *In memoriams* worthy of the name. Of course, in the obligatory tone and, in *'t Pallieterke*, even more badly written than usual. The summary of my greatest triumphs contained incorrect dates, titles, and fellow actors. And the focus of my life was suddenly in a domain I loathed

more than anything: politics. The hypocrisy of righteousness which I never committed, contrary to all the gossip and slander.

Everyone is out to use you for their own ends. Until no one wants to anymore.

As far back as adolescence, I have felt politically homeless, and it has always remained so. Aside from lovers, I have been loyal only to my calling as an artist and my duty as a theatre director. Steadfast in non-alliance: thus have I always laboured and lived. If I ever let myself get talked into a membership card for a political organization, then it was only for the benefit of my people, my company, my dreams, and my budgets. I'd take as many as necessary, if would help.

At a certain point I was a three-time card carrier without ever having been to a single meeting. I had better things to do than palaver over rubbish collection, liquor licenses, and residency regulations. If they even got that far, their noisy powwows being more bickering and beer than getting down to brass tacks.

The politician operates from a framework he wants to realise in the future. In doing so, he so often calls upon integrity, common sense, and transparency that you know he's short on all three. If there's something I believe in, then it is the lie. The artistic lie. The upfront deception called theatre and that does not pretend to strive for the truth, because "truth," now *that* is deception.

Genuineness is what it's all about. And it has just one theme. The miserable fate that awaits every one of us. We, the mortals. Best expressed thanks to an age-old sleight of hand: the alliance of comedians. And within that noble trickery—carried out on wooden planks, in front of unnatural footlights, and between two oversized curtains—everything is permitted. As long as it works.

This was the motto of my one lifelong passion. My other passion left me a dozen years ago by dying without a goodbye. My Lea. The great Lea Liebermann. The best actress I ever saw act, and the only woman who understood me. Today, in the Royal Theatre in The Hague, is a foyer is named after her.

After *her*.

---

p 241, 244-251

IV. Downfall (Third Act)

IV.2

No matter how brutally the occupation dug in, my brother continued to buy fine wines on the black market for rock-bottom prices, he continued to frequent illegal dogfights, where he gambled away yet more of his savings. He kept company with seedy whores and was a near-victim of a fatal attack on his new friends, a pair of German officers who played fast and loose with the rules of the Third Reich. His clandestine affairs, however, bothered me less than how he carried on in public. Behaviour that the Militärverwaltung in fact encouraged and applauded. [...]

Without my knowing, and once I did know, against my wishes, he used my opera house to celebrate Hitler's birthday. More than once. For him, the matter was not open for discussion. What was I supposed to do, fire my own brother? With the risk that, in a drunken rant, he would complain to the higher-ups and in turn get me fired, too? That would be catastrophic, because then what protection

could I offer Lea? Certainly if they were out to punish me by further tightening the screws on her. My hands were tied. The only thing I would not do—never!—was participate in one of those celebrations.

I stood (for the first time, and never again) seething in the wings. I arrived at the last minute, after my youngest and one of my most loyal technicians came to warn me.

The chap had left his post in the Opera and came running to the Bourla. Did I realise what was going on there, half a mile further up? Now I understood why Rik had implored me to leave all the preparations and planning over to him. The "special recital" he had hinted at, weeks prior—admittedly, Rik had called it "an extremely important event"—turned out to be a colossal homage in a fully packed house. All the box seats had been assigned to Wehrmacht bigwigs, and the stalls, too, were crowded with VIPs, according to my technician. He sounded downcast, nervous, and angry.

Rumour had it that he had Communist resistance leanings. For months I had warned him to be careful, and to keep his eyes open. He would always look at me like I was his senile grandfather and reply, "I always keep my eyes, open, Mister Alex. If anyone knows this, it's you and your wife. How is Madame Lea, by the way?"

To save time, I went in through the Opera's front door. To my horror, in the entrance foyer I was greeted, courteously and gratefully, by some latecomers. All of them big shots from the Diets[2] caboodle. I couldn't be certain about Squinty Moens—was it him? But the canonized entrail-diviner August Borms and pastor Cyriel Verschaeve were there for sure.[3] On each other's arm: one blind seer leading the other to the cloakroom. Borms, as usual, appeared to be inhabiting a higher plane than a place one stows coats, hats, and umbrellas. Verschaeve wore in his customary cassock and, as always, in the company of some black-booted angel. A different angel than last time. Then, that jackanapes lectured me, in my own foyer, about war as "historical hygiene." The present snotnose would have, his babyface aside, fit right in with the honour guard of Flemish SS men lining the grand staircase of the entrance hall. On every stair: one left and one right. All of them armed to the teeth, all of them rigidly at attention, like wax figures. So phony-looking that you could insert a coin and they would click their heels. Where had Rik drummed them up? Did he know them personally? Did they come up with this bombastic idea themselves?

I hurried up the stairs, past the grim honour guard. But not to the auditorium. Via a small door next to the toilets which led straight to the stage.

From the wings, *côté jardin*, I looked in astonishment at the painted backdrop, eerily lit from below. A gigantic portrait of the Führer. Not even much of a likeness, save the moustache. Whose handiwork was it? How did they get it in here? Had someone painted it in our atelier? Why was I, yet again, kept in the dark?

From the wings on the opposite side, *côté coeur*, my brother strides onto the stage into a sudden sea of hard, white light. He, too, is in uniform and the auditorium cheers him like a messiah. Once at the lectern, he makes a few corny jokes that only just don't fall flat and introduces the main speaker. Windbag Jef Van de Wiele. Leader of the *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond* or the *Deutsch-Vlämische*

---

[2] Germanic-Netherlandish, derived from the Middle Dutch word meaning "folk." The term *Diets* was enthusiastically employed by 20th-century fascists whose goal was a pan-Netherlandish union.

[3] "Squinty Moens" was a founder of Verdinaso, a Belgian antisemitic, authoritarian-fascist movement.
August Borms was a Flemish nationalist politician and Nazi collaborator. Executed in 1946.
Cyriel Verschaeven was a Flemish nationalist priest and Nazi collaborator. Fled to Austria after the war, condemned to death (in abstentia).

Arbeitsgemeinschaft or both, maybe even a third club. I had long lost track of the alliances and the defections and the grudge matches within the Blackshirt nomenklatura. His speech is amplified, as though he is now addressing, as he did a while ago, fifteen thousand enthusiasts in the athletic arena in Deurne. At the outset of the war, I had assumed that he, as a Doctor of Letters and Philosophy, would have mainly busied himself with rewriting school textbooks to suit fascist ideology. I had once even sat on a literary jury with him. His friends knew him as Jef Cognac. Now, Rik was introducing him as "our SS-Obersturmbannführer Van de Wiele."

SS-Obersturmbannführer Van de Wiele's speech is lengthy and not without repetition. After half an hour, the point of his harangue comes down to whether we, the Flemish, still stand united behind the birthday celebrant. The audience springs to its feet in salute. "*Ja!*" "*Jawohl!*" "*Sieg heil!*" After a few minutes, the ovation segues into the overture to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, conducted by our Rik. He stands in sweaty bliss on his podium, waving his baton with abandon. Suddenly he notices me. He looks pleasantly surprised to see me and, without missing a beat, motions for me to come out from the darkened wings. There is an empty chair next to Van de Wiele, who sits waiting for the overture to end. I shake my head and hold up both hands, palms forward, as if to say, "No thanks, Rik, no thanks." He shrugs and returns to his *Meistersinger*.

After their enthusiastic Wagner, the orchestra plays, with full-throated audience participation, first our Flemish anthem, *De Vlaamse Leeuw*, followed by the Dutch *Wilhelmus* and *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*, then *Deutschland über Alles* and finally the *Horst Wessel Song*. During that last hymn, the doors to the stalls swing open and in marches the honour guard carrying old banners and a few new flags. Again, the stately building of which I am the director-general and where I am now lying doggo in the wings echoes with deafening cheers. When the honour guard goose-steps their way to the stage, I decide it's time to slip out the back door for some quiet and a breath of fresh air, in the bosom of my beloved city.

It is some time before I've calmed down enough to ring my secretary Sonja to say I won't be able to come round to her flat that evening.

I go home. Lea remains silent. As do I.

It did not stop at the birthday tributes. My brother and a handful of his players went, in their free time and fully uniformed, to wave off the new Flemish SS Legion[4] volunteers from our railway cathedral, the Central Station on De Keyserlei. Rik and his musical cohorts positioned themselves in a semicircle at the front end of the platform, the strings on folding chairs, the winds standing. Clearly visible and audible to all who had to pass or those drawn in by the music. The Flemish Legion volunteers had to squirm past the crowd of excited onlookers.

Music in the open air is an uplifting experience. The railway police looked and listened along.

The legionnaires arrived in dribs and drabs, long before their scheduled departure. Either on their own or thronged by loved ones, but always in a mood of swollen pride and mild melancholy. My brother and his musicians did their best to buoy the morale of the volunteers, the music varying from upbeat to triumphant. Flags and banners with battle slogans adorned the waiting locomotives and most of the carriages. "For Altar and Hearth." "Crusade against the Bolsheviks." "For Rome, Against Moscow."

My brother had expertly set a popular poem by Bert Peleman, dedicated to the Flemish Legion, to music. It was a standard number at every farewell event. The melody deserved better than

[4] The "Vlaamse Legioen" was a collaborationist military formation recruited amongst Dutch-speaking volunteers from German-occupied Belgium, predominantly from Flanders.

Peleman's pompous doggerel. Peleman was and remained a failed cabaretier and—an exception in our country—a barely acclaimed writer. [...] By now, Peleman, too, was a fervent Blackshirt. I had met him on only a few occasions, and each time left with a yet lower opinion of him. Another poser who, under whichever banner and flag happened to be flying, managed to worm himself into key positions thanks to simplistic gibberish and shrewd machinations. [...] His verses were so abominable that no one could think of a foreign bungler bad enough to compare him to. No one called Bert Peleman the Flemish this or that. They called Bert Peleman Bert Peleman, and this was bad enough.

And yet, thanks to my brother's compositional flair, everyone in the railway cathedral sang these crude verses with verve and volume. They sang along with *all* the songs. In full voice and whipped up by the whistles and rhythmic steam puffs of the locomotives that pulled out at last, heading for the faraway, perilous East. "We'll break the Bolsheviks. / The spirit of the Geus keeps us gallant. / We shall march through Russia, / We men of the Flemish Legion."

One of the first to die on the eastern front was one of the Legion's co-founders. Reimond Tollenaere, venerable commander-general of the Netherlandish Militia Black Brigade and Belgian MP. His family had been Blackshirts for years. Their mother, a stringent and deeply religious widow, at the forefront. Raymond, her eldest, had tested the seminary waters, but his temperament got in the way. He changed his name to Reimond and went into politics.

As commander-general, Reimond would not recruit volunteers for a campaign without enlisting himself. Service he had often referred to in his well-attended rallies as "blotting out the ignominious Bolshevik plague." So off he went, leading one of the first battalions to head eastward. "He shuddered at the thought of arriving too late," his brother Leo said later. Five months later and two hundred kilometres south of St. Petersburg, the venerable commander-general perished in the village of Kopcy under night-time artillery fire. Not launched by Russian hordes, but by Spanish Falangists who also fought on the side of the Nazis but, confused by the snow and the freezing cold, mistook their target. Not a single wall of the venerable commander-general's shed was left standing. Friendly but deadly fire in an endless expanse of ice.

The home front received the news of his death with shock and disbelief. [...] Everyone is aware of the true cause of his death, but everyone clings to the Great Lie: that the venerable commander-general was cravenly shot in the back during a valiant attack on a Russian encampment. To further disguise the lie, yet at the same time to promote it to propaganda tool, a grandiose memorial evening was held at the Palais de Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Afterwards they decided that just one memorial service was not enough. The Diets nomenklatura insisted that one take place in Antwerp as well. In my Bourla. With the explicit blessing of the *Stadtkomissar*.

As director-general of the Royal Theatres of Antwerp, I have no choice but to be present. Not in the wings this time, but front and centre. As host. I am not required to give a speech, but my absence could be taken as a sign of defeatism, even treason. Everyone is on edge, the situation in Africa and Russia is looking optimistic, victory finally looks within reach, anyone who sows doubt is sidelined or purged. I cannot risk letting this happen to me, and with it lose my ability to protect Lea. Not now, not yet, not after everything I've sacrificed for her and manoeuvred into place. So yet again, I must choose the lesser of two evils: I will be there. But without telling Lea. No need to worry and to upset her. I just have to pray she won't find about it second hand.

And that she will not take another of her long walks, because I won't be able to come to her aid if things take a bad turn. I'll be stuck in the theatre for hours. Memorials for freshly fallen heroes are time-consuming events.

p 259-260, 268-278

IV.3

"Lea? Lea!" Rik and I pace desperately through the Zurenborg quarter. We've been at it for hours, we've scoured countless neighbourhoods, my feet are numb, sweat dribbles down my temples. As killingly cold as the recent winters were, how sweltering this summer now is, compounding the disgusting scenes I had never imagined I would witness in my hometown. The penetrating smell is one of mortal fear and putrefaction. This is a night of blood, screams, all-out violence.

Rik and I hope to find some sign of her, but the longer our search carries on, the greater the fear we may have lost Lea for good this time. So many people disappear these days—why would I be spared this loss? Soon it will be daybreak. Lea, where are you?

For lack of any better idea, we began our search at Central Station. Not the main entrance, but on the side: the Pelikaanstraat, the epicentre of so many tragedies. There, early one morning a few months ago—there had been a hailstorm, the pavements looked rice-strewn, like after a wedding in peacetime—I had seen a group of poor buggers standing in silence. "Those fools just show up voluntarily for their *Arbeitseinsatz*, they get taken by train to Mechelen, and then to God knows where after that."

I heard that from our young technician later that day. His voice shook with anger. "And the Jewish Council encourages it! Can you get your head around that?" He was the one who warned me about that sinister birthday celebration in our Opera. His name is Johannes, everyone calls him Jean. Jean knows everything and keeps his eyes skinned. Despite our age difference, he is one of the few I trust enough to confide in. It was Jean who took me aside in panic tonight after the performance. Never had I seen him so pale and terror-stricken. Police moles had tipped off his mates, he said. There's to be a raid tonight, the biggest ever. And someone, he says, his voice breaking, saw Madame Lea wander past earlier in the evening.

Towards Central Station. The neighbourhood where most of Antwerp's Jews lived.

[...]

I will always be grateful to Rik for having stood by me that night. As soon as I heard Jean's forewarning, I hurried home and, as I feared, found the flat empty. My legs almost gave out. All my life I've been the servant of the imagination. In my realm, sphinxes and witches could predict the future; the Saviour could be born in a Flemish carnival caravan; a man could murder his father, impregnate his mother, and still become king. I could make it convincing, as either actor or director. But now, something truly unimaginable occurred to me. I could lose Lea. Really lose her. Everything I had, everything I had accomplished, could lose its purpose and its worth. I heard my breath catch and grind like someone having spasms. I felt my body lurch from the table to the telephone, watched my right hand grasp the receiver like the grip of a cleaver and my left index finger hook itself into the dial. It took me four tries. Rik let it ring for at least a minute before answering. "Who's this and what do you want?" I heard him bark. I was so tongue-tied I couldn't get a word out. The voice on the other end of the line threatened to alert the SiPo, the security police, unless I identified myself and stated my business, pronto. But the moment Rik understood, through my stammering, that there was trouble with Lea, he said just two words before hanging up: "I'm coming."

I don't like to admit it, nor do I tell him, but tonight I'm glad he's wearing his uniform. This, together with his gruff expression and assertive tone, commands respect wherever we go. No one dares send

us away; everyone lets us nose around and ask questions. Only two cops ask to see our papers—they look askance at me because I am wearing neither uniform nor insignia, and I glance about anxiously and clumsily. Rik shoves his *Ausweis* under their nose, the one he used to use to go to the dogfights. The date has long expired, but Rik is yelling at them before they have the chance to examine the names and the stamps. “Do you have any idea who we are? What’s *your* name and rank? And who’s in charge here, goddamit? Speak up!” The cops, young men, let us pass, relieved to be rid of us. We don’t encounter many of their superiors, mostly just officers of the same rank. Regular policemen with regular noggins in a regular cop’s get-up. No Germans about, just here and there small gangs of Jew-hunters and other Blackshirts. Some of the cops are sombre, clearly not pleased to be here; others look wound-up, eager for action, drunk without drink. One of the first dust-ups we witness, a ways up, is between a few Blackshirts and a pastor on the steps of his church. He won’t let them in, they claim he has given three families refuge, which is not only against the law, but it makes him a traitor. It ends with them punching him in the face and dragging him down the steps by his ankles. His head slams against the stone, tread by tread. One of the assailants stands in a pathetic pose with his foot planted on the pastor’s chest, while his cohorts storm into the church. We hear shouts, heavy objects falling, breaking glass. “Keep on walking,” Rik hisses. He recognized one of the Blackshirts but does not want to get involved. Because he disapproves, or because he doesn’t want to waste precious time? I don’t ask, he doesn’t say. But his acquaintance comes running after us, his eyes glistening. He thanks us for coming to help. “We’ll need it, it’s a big clean-up tonight.” Rik asks him where “the most action is.” The friend turns on his heels, grinning. “Your choice, Rik, do as you please and never mind the rest.” I can’t stand the sight of that grin, not now, so I walk further. Behind me, I hear my brother and the acquaintance exchange a few more words, then hurried footsteps as Rik catches up to me. “He didn’t know much,” he pants. “We’re going to need all the luck we can get, brother.” We pass a deserted street where an abandoned taxi is on fire. A beacon of shockingly blazing light, against all the blackout guidelines. Who is even paying any attention tonight? It’s a full moon, the clearest night of the year, the entire city glows in the pale moonlight, the passing trucks also have their headlamps on. Rik and I walk in the beams of light and gesture to the drivers to stop. They do not, and we’re forced to leap to the side to let them pass. These are not military vehicles. On the side panels and on the rear doors is the name of a removal firm, the city’s largest. Arthur Pierre. One of the lorries advertises Solo margarine. “Vitamin Enriched! Always Fine & Fresh!” The painted block letters have started to peel. As they recede down the street, so too does the sound of banging and shouting from their cargo hold. It’s still broiling hot. In the distance there’s constant shouting and commotion. Rik and I look at each other and frown, we walk on in silence. Around a corner, all hell has broken loose. Policemen are pelted with bottles and roof tiles from a house they are trying to clear out. One policeman takes aim at an upper floor where the ruckus is coming from but is restrained by another, who points at their colleagues climbing along the eaves toward the projectile thrower. A roof tile smashes into the roof of a parked car, a bottle shatters on the asphalt, another hits a woman on the back of the head as she is led to a waiting lorry, a child on each hand. She stumbles to the ground, pulling the children with her. A cop hoists all three up and shoves them further. Other residents, too, are led into the hold. They are all ages, most of them still in their nightclothes, and few have any belongings save a small bundle of clothes. Some resist loudly until they are inside, then they fall silent; others beg and protest until they’re treated to the slap of an open hand or a truncheon to the head. Down the street, police pummel four young men in their underwear. One of the policemen is thrown to the ground; one of the four arrestees escapes, his bare feet making no sound as he disappears around the corner. The remaining three are beaten and made to stand against a building, hands to the wall. The bottle-thrower, attempting to escape via the drainpipe, falls to the ground with a terrible thud. Two officers pick him up by the armpits, he screams in pain—his forearm looks like it’s got an extra elbow—and they throw him with the others in

the back of the truck. It is already quite full, but the vehicle shows no sign of driving off. Men take a sledgehammer to the door of the neighbouring house. Where are we? Isn't this the Lamorinièrestraat? I think I recognise the school—a high school. Its front gate, too, has been smashed open. Out of the corner of my eye I see two cops hurry out of a row house, their arms loaded with household goods hastily bundled into what looks like a sheet or pillowcase. They stuff the loot into the side bags of their bicycles. Across the street, an older woman crouches in her doorway, she's offering something, but the policeman slaps it out of her hands and drags her by the hair towards the truck. She grabs hold of his wrist as he pulls her. He comments to a companion, they chuckle, the second one takes over, and again the woman holds on to him to ease the pain in her scalp. She screeches curses in a language I do not understand. I stand there dazed with disbelief. Nothing I have ever read has prepared me for this. I feel helpless, ridiculous, redundant, dirty. There's no reading Rik's expression. He surveys the scene, thoroughly taking it all in, he is totally focused, I still think he is looking for someone in charge, someone with real clout. He is sweating more profusely than I am, his uniform is soaked; the dark circles in his armpits are white-edged. I wonder if he is carrying his Browning. Later, he will be accused of having taken part in the operation, while he is only here on behalf of me, his younger brother. He knows many of the policemen from elsewhere—nightlife, societies, politics. Many of them address him: some jolly, some solemn, but always in friendship. Rik was always the more popular one. A second Arthur Pierre removal truck drives up, but still they continue stuffing people into the first one. The driver gets out and protests. Overload the lorry, he says, and before you know it the ersatz tires will burst, and if you pile people atop one another like this, they'll soon be puking and worse, and he'll be docked for the cleaning. "Come on, let's get out of here," Rik whispers. He has been talking with a cop who has kept to himself, hardly participating in the rampage. "I know where they're being held." My brother strides off, I follow. We pass some streets where the stillness is otherworldly, and others where the chaotic scene from a while back repeats itself. Rik steps up his pace—where does he get the stamina, the drive? We go into another school, a primary school, on the Grote Hondstraat. Four SS men, each with a dog—these are the first Germans we've seen tonight, guard the entrance. Hundreds of detainees silently sit and lie on the concrete paving stones of the playground. "I'll start over here," says Rik. "You take that side." I obey. Children whimper, they look at me, frightened, parents hold them in a comforting embrace; grandfathers and teenage sons stand around looking despondent or defiant. The scene is unbearable, but I must keep on looking. Where is Lea? The smell here, too, is horrible. Suffering always has a stench. The toilets alongside the playground are surely clogged by now, but people are still queuing up for them. No Lea among them. Someone in the queue asks a guard for water and gets a shove instead. Another approaches me—a man about my age, wearing a dressing gown and black dress shoes, no socks; his face is wan, his hair dishevelled. He recognises me, he says. He whispers a plea for help. Not just for him, but for everyone here. I am an honest man, he tells me, he's seen me perform, he admires me, sometimes he came backstage afterwards to congratulate me, I can expose this, he says, in the newspapers, I have influence, more influence than I think. A guard notices, and shouts, "Shut up and sit down!" With a nod, I promise to do what I can. He returns the nod. I cannot remember ever meeting him. Maybe he's making it up. But who wouldn't, in this situation? Suddenly, Rik is standing next to me, and he's angry. He finally managed to talk to an inspector, from the looks of the man's badges and attitude. "We've got to go back a couple of streets," he says under his breath. "Van Diepenbeeckstraat. They've been herded there in an empty factory." Rik curses the whole way there. The man explained it all to him: the city-wide razzia is in retaliation for the previous one, which our cops botched by leaking the plan all over the place beforehand. The Germans suspected sabotage by the resistance and exploitation by unscrupulous sharks. They caught a policeman who tipped off a family in exchange for a thousand francs and twenty-five black-market eggs. And he was far from the only one. So now the SiPo has reversed the roles: tonight, they guard the perimeter of

the Jewish neighbourhoods, and our cops have to do the roundup. “The SiPo wants a thousand,” says Rik, “but some of our own bastards, the fanatics, are aiming for twelve hundred, just to show how keen they are. They snatch up whoever they can and completely ignore the guidelines. It’s not looking good for your Lea.” And there’s no point in contacting the higher-ups. “Our mayor has seen to it that he’s unreachable for a few days, he’s holed up at his retreat in Kapelle-op-den-Bos, and the police commissioner sent in a deputy so he could go dine in fancy company after a performance. He himself spread it around so as to cover his arse. Three guesses, brother, which theatre he went to.” I stop short and look at him. He stops too and laughs. Ironically, though—he is irate, indignant, and cynical. “Don’t worry, he’s not at our outfit. He went to the Majestic on the Carnotstraat. For the premiere of a revue.” He walks on, fulminating. “A farce called ‘Like a Three-Ring Circus.’ His troops think it’s a bloody riot, too. But then for real. Their boss is sitting there enjoying a cabaret with sing-alongs and comedy sketches, bottles of bubbly, and maybe a bare tit here and there, while they’re out doing the dirty work. Refuse, and they’ll face disciplinary action.” A few more Arthur Pierre trucks rumble past. Rik pulls out a hip flask. It’s the first time I see him drink tonight. He takes a swig, wipes the mouth of the flask with a sweaty hand, and passes it to me. “Grappa,” he says. “Not exactly chilled.” I drink anyway. Anything to dull the nerves a bit. Two sturdy gulps, and one more for good measure. The sweltering heat is relentless. Rik wipes his forehead with a handkerchief, I’ve forgotten to bring one along. We cross the Van Diepenbeeckstraat. Here, too, are SS officers with dogs. No one stops us entering the former factory. In this very place, years ago, Lea and I bought our mattress in a going-out-of-business sale. Top quality for a bargain price. “Slumber in unparalleled comfort!” Now, hundreds of people are lying on the stone floor of the huge space, waiting to be sent to yet another holding centre. Bare bulbs hang on long wires from the rafters; the weak light sheds macabre shadows over the faces. It is difficult to make them out from a distance, so Rik and I have no choice but to walk up and down the rows, each taking a side, group by group, one by one, in the hope of finding Lea amidst these doomed souls. I try to show them some respect, look each one in the eyes, but I don’t always succeed. There are so many. Infants, the elderly, resigned, angry, imploring, aflame with contempt or hope—the faces just keep on coming. Another few rows to go. The first rays of daylight show through the skylights. I feel a heavy hand on my shoulder. Rik. He shakes his head. I have never seen him so discouraged and exhausted. His focus and drive are gone. “There’s no point,” he says. “Go to sleep, tomorrow we’ll drive to Mechelen. A few trucks have already left for the barracks there. That’s our last chance. But we’ve got to keep believing, brother.”

Outside the factory we say a sombre goodnight under the watchful eye of four SS officers and their dogs. The exhaustion and the heat are part of it, but I can’t help noticing that Rik feels he has failed. He had genuinely wanted to help. He wanted to find Lea, rescue her, to assuage my—and perhaps, partly, his own—dismay at what we were forced to witness tonight.

Physical displays of affection were never my family’s forte, especially amongst the men. Generations of emotional lummoxes, ashamed of anything that might pass for a show of affection or comforting. We see it as a sign of weakness. Our Rik was always more emotionally rigid than me, and now he forces us into a situation we both find completely awkward. Yet I’m touched by his gesture. Never or since have I felt so close to the lout. He embraces me. Clumsily, sweaty, too long, too tightly. He simply doesn’t know how to do this. Nor do I. “Keep your chin up,” he says, avoiding eye contact. “I’ll ring you.” He turns and heads back towards the city centre, to his place on the Wolstraat. I, too, start my lonely trek homewards, in an awakening city I will never see the same way again.

Waiting at home is the biggest surprise of the entire past twenty-four hours. Lea is sitting at the kitchen table. Wide awake, calm, and her beautiful self again. At least, less haggard-looking than the past few months. She is smiling and drinking tea.

I am too astonished and exhausted than to exclaim, “What are you doing here?” I’m on the verge of tears, which upsets both of us. Caring as always, she helps me to a kitchen chair. She pours me a cup of herbal tea. I hate the stuff, but I take it from her. I drink the tea, and Lea, the angel, starts apologizing. She didn’t know I would be home already. She thought I would sleep in my theatre attic again tonight. Or at Sonja’s. Sonja, yes, calm down, she says. Of course she’s known about her, about me and “that girl,” for some time. She also says she understands, and that we mustn’t, well, “dramatize” these things. She thought long and hard about this tonight, and about so much more. On a bench in that little park around the corner. It was far too hot inside, and too stifling for a long walk. She just sat there happily, looking at the full moon through the leafy canopy until daybreak. And again she apologises. For having made it not at all easy for me lately. And that, while I’ve got so much on my plate already. But I mustn’t ever doubt, she says, how grateful she is for my concern and commitment.

Only now does it dawn on me that Lea is completely oblivious to the razzia. She’s got no idea of what happened just a couple of kilometres from here. All that time, she just sat philosophising on a park bench around the corner. And she blames herself that I’m so upset.

For a long time, she continues calmly, she thought we should have moved to Brussels, or Charleroi if need be, at the outset of the war. Everyone assured her the mood there was less dark. “Jean always says so, too.” And to be honest, for a long time she held it against me that we didn’t move, but didn’t dare admit it. That was wrong, she says now. And in the end, I didn’t have much choice anyway. My work, my contacts, my pride and joy—they’re all here, in this city. And thus her own future, too. And she must just learn to make peace with it, she says, on good days and bad. Quit complaining! So many others are worse off than she. Right? Very well: from now on she will gripe less, and not be such a nuisance. And if she doesn’t always succeed, could I please gently correct her? And forgive her? She lays a hand on mine.

All I can do is nod. For a moment, I consider telling her how *my* night has gone. Not exactly musing on a wooden bench in a quiet park. I want to tell her about the hundreds of faces in that playground and in the mattress factory. About the man who fell from the drainpipe and the old woman dragged by the hair to the lorry. I even feel the need to tell her, but I do not. I will leave Lea in ignorance. Better to keep mum. I mustn’t undermine her renewed fortitude; mustn’t let on what she narrowly escaped. It is better for us both that she finds out as little as possible, to be better prepared for the future, whatever it brings.

“Come,” Lea says, pulling me up from my chair. “For old times’ sake.” And for the first time in a very long time, she gives me a childish, over-the-top hug.

So ends a night without end.

---

p 346-350

IV.5

“To the zoo with him!” the fellow shouts as he gives me a kick in the arse. Not for the first time. This time he boots me so hard that I fall over onto cobbles of De Keyserlei. I break the fall with my hands, feel them scrape the stone, but at least did not sprain my wrists. The fellow loses his balance—or pretends to—and plants his heel on the back of my left hand. I hear a crack, feel a stab of pain. An old woman spits at me as I lie prone on the paving stones. “To the zoo with th’ bastard,” she shouts, too, in the crudest Antwerp accent I’ve heard in a long time. The mob has formed a circle around me. A kind of blowhole amidst the massive crowd thronging De Keyserlei. Autos and trams hoot and jingle

exuberantly, have ground to a halt amongst the thousands of revellers. Where did they suddenly find all those flowers? All the tricolour banners and streamers? A young couple dances on the roof of a taxi to the music of a pickup band. I stay put on the ground, fearful of the kicks resuming. They do not. A few men wearing indeterminate uniforms and armed with carbines claim to be in charge. All around me there is laughing, ranting, hollering, drinking, singing, kissing, blustering, weeping.

I try to shut it out. Half of my assailants don't even know who I am or why they are assaulting me. Ever so often I hear someone call out my name, but it gets drowned out in the festive din. It is not important who I am. It is about what I symbolize.

At first they shoved me along and I had only to endure the occasional curse or insult. Then I had to suffer being spat upon, and soon enough I was being tugged at, punched, and kicked, and now I've taken my first spill. As I get back up, the first thing I see is blood. My palms have been torn open. Blood invites more blood. Out of nowhere, a fist hits my nose, I feel another crack, and a trail of bloody snot drips onto my shirt. My jacket was ripped off me some time ago and, like a trophy, torn to shreds. Our blowhole starts moving again. Fortunately, there's not far to go. We have reached the Century Hotel, close to Central Station. Seen from the ground just now, it looked taller than usual. Different flags bedeck the façade than yesterday.

I stumble along, my head bent and my hands tucked safely in my armpits, and do my best to keep up the tempo, at least by not resisting. Just a few hundred metres until we've reached what seems to be my destination. Our legendary zoological gardens, hardly worth that name anymore. The flock of pink flamingos was either eaten or just died; the herd of giraffes is thinned out to almost nothing. The last time I visited, there were only two left, skin and bones, listlessly gazing around their splendid Egyptian pavilion. The few remaining apes are going madder by the day from the solitude, and most of the predators had been killed off at the outset of the occupation, for fear they would escape after a bombardment. Those left died of starvation. There was nothing to feed them, not even the cadavers of the lesser creatures in the menagerie.

Liberation had been on everyone's lips for weeks, yet it still took me by surprise. I had, out of loathing and exhaustion, closed myself off to the rumourmongering. On the one side were those harbouring the maniacal conviction that the Allies could still be repelled and that their talk of advances was pure propaganda. On the other side was the growing ecstasy amongst those who whispered that the first Allied tanks had already reached Hoboken.

These two views often led to violent clashes, usually after a bacchanal gone amok. The last of the liquor supply had been uncorked and privately quaffed by both sides—the one side out of brash tenacity and poorly-disguised fear, by the other out of a premature flush of triumph and the thirst for vengeance—and then the skirmishes broke out in the still-darkened streets and parks. Gunshots in the distance, stray bullets in the night-time, the first reprisals. The shadow war of freedom. The spectacle of the retreating German soldiers confirmed it: dishevelled and silent, they left us in a column, first on bicycle or in dilapidated lorries and confiscated buses. Later, on foot, pushing handcars or groaning under overfilled knapsacks. Not a horse to be seen.

I steered clear of it all and refused to let it worry me. Blinded by self-deception, I insisted that my company just keep doing what they paid us to do: rehearse and perform. Even though our audiences were steadily thinning out. It was nothing more than our duty. I convinced myself that not much would change—little, after all, had changed after the previous takeover. Why should I flee? And where to? The last time, I was better off staying put rather than charging off like a headless chicken to the Côte d'Azur.

The one who did worry, though, was Lea. This was her nature. And anyway, she hadn't much more to do at home than fret. Every day, before I left for the Bourla, she reminded me to be careful.

She suggested on occasion that I go into hiding, on my own if necessary. Temporarily, just to be on the safe side, somewhere out of town, with friends.

"You've protected and helped so many people in your life. Isn't it time somebody was prepared to stick out their neck for you?" She worded it cautiously, knowing that such talk irritated me.

And indeed, I did not see the point. I had nothing to be ashamed of. The idea of going into hiding in my own country was degrading, and besides, I had my responsibilities as director-general. Most of all, I wanted to stay close to her. She had chosen for me, and now I chose for her. I would never abandon her.

I had hoped Jean and his mates would come back to the Bourla after we returned from The Hague, but he never did. This presented us with logistical problems, but we split their duties amongst those who stayed behind. The stage manager, the dresser, the actors. I myself stood in the wings, tugging on a rope to hoist a stage backdrop into the fly tower. Doing it by hand took some getting used to, after having been spoilt by the simple push of a button on The Hague's modern, fully-automatic system.

Why Lea didn't go with Jean, she never did say, and I didn't ask. Nor did we talk about what had happened between them while I was stuck in the theatre for the gala performance of *Faust*. Maybe nothing had happened, and I had just let me jealous fantasy get the better of me.

I did not pester her with my delusions, and she was discreet with the facts. Two people whose careers and talent consisted of serving up the words of other for hours on end had perfected, on a personal level, the art of non-communication.

There is one thing I'll always be grateful for regarding Liberation Day. That Lea was sitting at home with no inkling as to what was happening, engrossed in her verse translation of a play. Only to realise some time later—hearing the crescendo of cheers and uproar on our street, and then the rumble of a Canadian tank past our house—that the day she had never dared hope would come had arrived at last.

She had run, crying, out onto the street. She kissed friends, complete strangers, and a Canadian soldier. He let her ride on his tank, up front, clinging to the barrel with one hand and waving a Belgian flag with the other. Later, at the intersection of the Palace of Justice, one of the many Allied military photographers had taken her picture. She, "La Lea," beaming like in the old days, surrounded by a swarm of exuberant neighbourhood children and leaning up against the bonnet of a stranded jeep—two flat tires, not even sabotaged.

The chaos and the teeming crowds prevented her from getting to the Bourla in time to see me dragged off from a rehearsal of Vondel's *Jozef in Dothan*. Nor, thank God, did she have to witness what I went through on De Keyserlei. She might well have rushed to my defence and risked the same mistreatment. She was spared all that. And I was, too.

In the end, this is all I could think of, every time I hit the paving stones with a smack on the way to our Zoo. Don't let Lea see this. Don't let her show up here. I don't know where she is, I miss her, I so wish she could comfort me. But she's better off anywhere but here with me. And maybe she always was.

---

p 355-358

My destination is a cage with high ceilings and measuring eight by ten metres. Bars on three sides separate us from a passage intended for spectators. There's a vague stench, like in the shipyard where Rik forced me to witness those dogfights. Dirty straw, lamp oil, wet dirt, and animal dung. Added to that here is the acrid smell of fresh blood and fresh piss.

While being pushed along that passage towards the entrance to the cage—shoved, actually, I could only just keep my balance—I noticed a banner strung across the long side. “See here the Lion of Flanders.” On the two shorter sides hung banners reading, “Do Not Feed.” “As long as he’s still got teeth.”

There are maybe twenty, thirty of us, and I am not the only one with torn-open palms or a bloody nose or lip. Some of them lie groaning on their back in the dusty straw, where predators might once have slept. I recognize a few of my cellmates from Rik’s parties or street demonstrations, or from a newspaper photo. Most of them are wearing provocative black. Their clothing is torn or soiled. Some of them recognize me, too. They nod at me, as to an ally. I do not nod back. I do not belong with this lot.

I want to raise this with the guards, demand a different cell, but one may not speak, let alone protest. Whoever does can expect a jab from a long, pointy staff that animal attendants once used here to punish ill behaviour.

On the other hand, I realise that the bars also provide a modicum of protection. If I had to choose between this tribulation or the one I just went through, between this cage and the mayhem of De Keyserlei, then I would choose for my present circumstances. Photographers are constantly at it. With flash, and from all angles. I shield my face with both hands, but most of my cellmates look unabashedly into the lens. People throw hunks of bread at us. No one eats it: pride and mistrust are stronger than hunger. What if the bread’s been messed with? What do they want now—pictures of us as wild animals at feeding time?

I notice my breathing becoming gradually more relaxed. I am indifferent to the situation. Perhaps this is not entirely normal. A protective armour is forming around my spirit. I am at once absent and present.

This is a good thing, once the first visitors come storming down the passage, in what proves to be a harbinger of an hours-long procession. Cursing, fulminating, crying out for revenge. All ages, all classes, all persuasions. Vengeance unites. Seamstresses, old hags, sailors, clerks, snotnoses, schoolteachers, bankers. Vengeance feels good. Who lets loose the most, who is the coarsest? Hard to say. Some of them shake their fist, others stick their head between the bars, frothing at the mouth, spitting, to vent their rage.

I feel sufficiently shielded and not particularly targeted. I belong neither behind these bars nor outside them. I do take note of all the expressions and gesticulations of the onlookers. You never know what role they might come in handy for. Humans have an infinite repertoire of gestures, and anger is one of our most expressive emotions. At the same time, I realise that my professional reflex might signify more sickness than strategy. I am supposed to be suffering here. I am supposed to be indignant, or remorseful. I am neither. What I do is muse on the Latin origins of the word “monster”—is it derived from the verb *monere*, to warn? Or from the verb *monstrare*, to point out? And which of the two is more apt for a brand-new monster like me?

One insight does slip through my wall of defence. These people. My people. Just look at them. Look how they rant, in this endless pageant of ignominy, in this display of public hatred. Is this them? The audience—my audience? Without whom my life would have no purpose? Without whom it would never have *had* a purpose? Surely there are those here who have seen me perform. Who applauded and cheered for me, who laughed and cried at my lines. Not even so long ago. And now look at them. Who is the real monster here? [...] Just look—masses of them, laughing and raving and cursing and happy to loathe. After our Antwerp Kristallnacht on Easter Monday, too, our fine folk turned out en masse. The shards were left unswept for days, the destruction remained untidied by

decree, so that the local tourists would all have the chance to come see it for themselves. Some went more than once to gawk at the devastation. How many of them are standing here now? This time satiating their lust for scandal on me and my fellow prisoners? We, the caged evil they suddenly shun. We, who they can curse and shriek and spit at so as not to have to spit on themselves. Where will they go next? Like a leaf on the wind, they blow along with every whim and every regime.

"Mister Desmet?"

One of the guards signals to me. The procession of rubberneckers has finally petered out. The man gestures that I should go over to the hatch in the centre of the wall and through which, many hours ago, they shoved me into the cage. As I approach the hatch, it clicks open. Just for me.

I am free to go, the guard says. On the condition that I leave the city and preferably the country, for a long time. Forever is also good. We are standing outside on the corner of the Koningin Astridplein. Night has fallen, and the festivities, from the sound of it, are still in full swing. The guard gives me a clean jacket, a felt hat, and a tricolour cockade. They let me wash my face gave me a packet of food. I shiver, even though it is not at all cold. "You deaf, or what?" says the guard. "Go. Hurry up, before I change my mind."

I thank him for realising I did not belong in that cage. He bursts out laughing. "You really are something," he says. "Just as thick-headed as they described you. Now go! And don't thank me." Then he turns more lenient, and at the same time angrier. "The one you should thank is Jean. Or no: thank Lea. Jean didn't want her to have to go on without you. He told us in detail what you put that poor woman through. But she needs you all the same, and doesn't want to throw you to the wolves."

I still don't go. First I want to know what gossip Jean has been spreading about me. But the man loses his temper. He gives me a shove. I almost fall again. "Go! If it weren't for your Lea, as far as most of my mates were concerned you'd have never set a foot outside this cage."