

High Key

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An extract

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Outlandia

To me, the shape of each object had its own meaning. Geometry, however, decided otherwise. It categorically rejected my doodles on paper and in the sand. Let's face it : the Greeks did live centuries before me! It didn't even reckon with the line the aeroplane was tracing in the sky.

'C'est un avion, ça?' Tokens of huge goodwill. *Mais moi, non.*

'C'est un dessin!'

'Viens!'

At the outset : checked paper. At the outset : not a crease, not a stain. The outcome : some sort of solution. Is this how vibration, rippling, murmur, hissing, rustling, loss, preservation are put into words? *Soyez sage!*

'This measuring tape is used for measuring the body.'

'Why call it a tape measure then and not a body measure?'

'Because it looks like a tape.'

'Or because we are worms?'

'Exactly, yes. Stop being silly.' My grandmother was patience incarnate.

I travelled extensively with my parents. I've told you all about it. Maybe they sort of hoped I'd get to know other children. Or that I would find a way of making myself useful to myself. But I was adamant and watched. It was as if I only lived with my nose, or with my eyes, or with my ears. The merest thing I was asked set my mind to work. Blabbermouths had to be remarkably intelligent kids, I reckoned!

Wherever widenings had been dug into the mountain flank, I put my head to the ground and looked between the fractured areas into the centre of the Earth. I could actually see the lava, the glistening blood of the terrestrial fireball.

While the others enjoyed a drink or photographed the view with much-too-small cameras, I studied the glistening rock flakes and crystals through my eyelashes. *High key.*

‘Mais vraiment, il est un lézard.’

‘Ou plutôt un petit dragon.’

How can we possibly know what others are seeing or hearing? I read in books that sound and light are things we visualize by means of straight, crooked and semi-circular lines. Formulas are being devised about them, expressing the despair and dismay that take possession of the human brain when purely scientific methods are followed. See also ‘progress’. In short, specialist literature offered little more than linguistic babble.

I would dance the magnetic fields of the objects and the electric charges I felt in my fingers and spine. I sang. When asked for an explanation, I told people I was singing the heat of the mountain.

‘Je crois qu’il est un peu fou.’

‘Non, non, il est comme ça. Il chante la chaleur, comme il dit. On en a déjà parlé au médecin.’

To them, a quick dance in three-four time at some party seemed simpler. A quick waltz, a fraction, a calculated movement, nought point seventy five. Enough of this.

‘When I was nineteen,’ the speaker said, ‘I moved to this town. After which I got married. But I remained an outlander.’

‘Maybe it’s all in the mind,’ the dancer said, retracing her steps and reading the sign her dance had written in the sand.

‘I have never been able to uncover the secrets of the impenetrable houses that were built along the water centuries ago. The locals have, I’m sure of it. But I stood facing walls. Grey alpine rock cliffs are open windows in comparison.

At times my mum and I travelled together. To France. We stayed with farmers or rented a room. I can still see her walking through the meadows with her camera and the tattered map.

She bought bread and wine for us in the villages. I still remember how she once asked for four tomatoes and the shopkeeper went and picked them in her backgarden. They were hot from the sun.

“But why charge us?” I asked. “They’re simply growing, no?” Funny, no?

I mean, honestly, in France conservatism is also thriving, and all tomatoes are now hydroponically grown. Picked raw, for transport reasons. Artificially ripened because of the market fluctuations. Taste replaced by advertizing, aroma by suitable light. You didn't honestly believe the shift to the right was merely a question of political beliefs, did you?

In a hotel where we stayed, I saw a girl my age cleaning rooms. I was young, healthy and strong. I had time on my hands and struck the same pose painters occasionally do in their self-portraits. Or my mother and I walked through the landscape.

I spent the rest of the day thinking of the chambermaid. I wanted to be like her. I wanted to scrub floors, understand socialism and walk in the moonlight once a week or read a nice book. And her many worries? Those I would share with myself.

I watched the woman shammying the butcher's counter. My mother bought the meat and I quietly told myself about life amidst dead animals. I said : "See how the sun dries those tiles! The worn away threshold, a truly moving sight! Surely it must bring back memories of customers. Your mother buys pig's kidneys and calf's liver because she likes offal. And the butcher's wife cuts the meat, takes the money and leaves the rest to the maid. That's the life, boy! Why have eyes in your head if not to make you see what the world is about!"

I patiently listened to myself speak, because I had decided to become this woman too, understand liberalism, cattle, traffic, the international flow of funds and the economic reasons behind so many wars. I was a lad of great enterprise. And the world's worries?

I'd probably lack the guts to charge people for my labour anyway. Funny, no? Yes, I thought so. I'd move into a house in this little town, and work for my wife and the others, the way others work for me and for their wives. There will be meat and guests will sleep in cleaned rooms and love each other. I will be a cabinetmaker and make doors for the houses so that people can go inside each other's place, and windows in the walls so that, from their rooms, people can look at the world, and coffins so that people can be returned to the Earth.'

Dancer : 'But now you live nowhere and your days slip by with you writing transportation documents at some harbour office and reading poetry.'

Speaker : 'So? Heavenly dew evaporates on the municipal tulips in the park. Workmen descend under the fountain and repair its noble mechanism so that strollers can enjoy the water that is being pushed up, the splashing and the light.

I consider myself lucky not to be married to some rich family's daughter and not being forced to start a clothes shop or a shoe shop. Plenty of surrounding villages, and challenges, on Sunday, by the moonlit ferry. And later on, being taught by her father how to do business. Waving orchard, oil on canvas. Or a holiday on the Balearic Islands.

Mustn't grumble, though. Christian traders, my next-door neighbours, have actually stopped emptying my rubbish bin to pry into my affairs. The special police no longer stop by. I can relax now. The danger of arson too seems less acute. Nobody's taking the time to go through my rooms in my absence anymore. I wonder what they found. Butter, milk and eggs? Or stale bread, smoked fish and an excellent little grain genever?

I've no reason to complain. The gas and electricity mains are more or less where they should be in this town. The mains voltage too has hardly been stepped up these last few years. The unsold kilowatt-hours are being channeled into the globe, a serious anaesthetic.

How safe, compared to life in the jungle. One little mosquito and I don't sleep a wink! For which see the blood traces on the wallpaper. Nothing can hurt me. None of those foreign peoples from school : the negroid type, the Asian race, the Slavs, the Eskimos, the Mongolian warriors. For which see the blood traces on the world. Those handbooks!

There are lots of Turks by the harbour. Mohammedans, the text book says. Apparently they come from the Middle Ages. We do complicated exercises in Anti-Racism year three.

I drink coffee with a Mussulman. Unity of time and action only. I refrain from discussing the work of Rik Wouters. He wants to know how much money I have.

"N'aie pas peur," he says, my new friend. "Me no fight."

"No," I say.

"Usually go like this," he says. "Someone come. Coffee? Bam, punches you in the face."

"I had no idea," I say. My Turkish is worse than his Dutch. He asks me where I work. I hand him the name and the address of the haulier.

"Then, I send something," he says. I make a small incision in my arm, not the artery. It's an old custom. My slate.

"C'est bien pour la santé," he says.

"C'est très important," I say. Always bear in mind that when we get ill and die, life is over. Bleeding is a tradition.

He strokes my stubble with his rough hand. The Arabs too only write consonants. A much more accurate way of expressing yourself. His crescent and-sickle beard sounds exactly the same. We're on the same wavelength.

"But," I say. "In Belgium, there is two." His Dutch is better. "Church and State." I keep mum about the liberal freethinkers' movement and anti-clericalism. I do not go into the social politics of the Radical-liberals either, the foundation of the Belgian Workmen's Party, and the problems inside the First International. But I do give a short historical survey of the educational system.

"Et la fraude fiscale, la prostitution, même l'avortement!" he says. He knows everything.

"Vous oubliez encore tout le secteur nucléaire."

"Il n'est pas dans le Coran. Mais toute l'histoire de tous les peuples se trouve là."

And Clovis who accepted baptism after having had...knowledge of Clotilda (I could hardly make myself write down this biblical term, already as a child it sounded pornographic to me). (Knowledge! I did, occasionally, steal a glance at the bible when my parents were out.)

"Nervii, Eburones, Albigenses, Frisians, Moors, Huguenots, I was made to copy their names a hundred times!" I shout. I should have become a bagpipe player, a Celt between Dover and Calais. This is Whisky. Are you receiving me, Alpha? The Canadians are coming.

Seriously. My friend wants to discuss the essence of faith. The coffee is almost cold, let's keep it short. He is an honest garage owner and he likes to discuss the Law when he's not working. A business in second-hand cars seemed in accordance with the Divine Principle.

"J'ai tous mes papiers." No disrespect, but it's not as if the Prophet went on foot, is it? He rode on a donkey. *Sagen wir im heutigen Rahmen Europas mit einem Mercedes 'occasion'.*

"The pious will be helped." (I should be so lucky.)

"C'est ça." If we all conducted a trade, nobody would be poor. Farmers stick to their land, of course. What else? Then - for there is work to be done - I reckon we should reclaim the empty christian places of worship, holy sites, and restore the unity of trade and faith. No, I didn't say "church and state". I said "trade and faith".

He sounds solemn now : "How many Belgians actually grasp the meaning of life?" He expects me to answer the answer and I answer : "C'est le matérialisme, on le trouve partout."

"Voilà. Et la drogue."

The title in my exercise book is "By fire and by sword". At the test, however, I answered "through inheritance, marriage and murder." Mistook Muhammed for Clovis. Sheer nerves. Minus five. Confused Christ with God. Even worse. Minus seven. Joseph and Mary with Adam and Eve, two couples though, or were they? Situated Paradise in Bethlehem. Unforgivable. Tigris and Euphrates. Wouldn't you know it. The immaculate conception? Wrote "Eve". Mixed up the dove and the snake. Desperate and wayward little me called the tree of knowledge a christmas tree. *I'm dreaming of a white Christmas.* Result : one furious teacher. And the forbidden fruit? A pine cone or what?

Note from my sweet grandmother. Dear Sir, could you kindly explain the difference between the apple as in Eve and as in Willem Tell? He keeps asking me, you see, since I always give him Swiss cheese for breakfast with a picture of this patriot on it. And while you're at it, dear sir, maybe you could also address the orange issue, he does know about William as in Mary but has no idea why Orangemen are orange and all, yours faithfully. My grandmother.

Snakes lay eggs, like pigeons. No problem. But despatching the prophet to Medina on a reindeer, honestly. Multiple choice. Father Christmas' Reins of Terror now? And Julius Caesar kept Goal, did he? God's name down as Joseph. Zero, and that's final. Hopeless. I had the most wonderful summer hols with my sweet grandmother, Helena.

I never passed history first time. From the very beginning, God's own country, to the closure of the Scheldt and the separation of Church and State by Joseph, the Second of course. I did, however, confuse his Reforms with the Reformation, but managed to pass.

A quiet Sunday. Friends of parents have come to visit. How does smoke detach itself from the glowing tip of a cigar? Surely this is much more fascinating than the difference between Gallic and Gaelic? How do the layered blue clouds float through the room on saturated air?

Starter, main course, dessert. The perfumes blend. When the men manifest the urge to make love I make myself scarce. Drinking water, springwater, holy water. Baptism may be administered in case of emergency.

I am more of an outlander than the outlanders. Take my Turkish friend. (We've ordered another coffee). He drinks his religion, eats it and spreads its spirit. Having listened to my confusion, this sweet, patient stubble-bearded creature, wants to know if I lead a civilized existence.

"People should give as much as they take," I say, for I want to welcome him to Belgium, my country. "I suggest you take."

"You must take more than you give," he answers. "Otherwise, business no good." How could I forget!, I do apologize.

"I have studied Greek, Latin, Gothic and very little Arabic. Hebrew even less."

"What makes soil fertile?" He's questioning me. I have no idea. He volunteers the answer : "It gives more than you give."

"Exactly, it yields a good crop," I say. I am learning.

"Quick learner, you!" he says. We laugh and slap each other's backs.

"Yet," he says. "Something missing."

"You're telling me."

"I teach you," he says. We've come full circle, the essence of faith, its dissemination.

"Okay," he says. "You know fig tree? Well, why fig tree carry plenty fruit?"

Invariably nervous at orals. The tree, wait a minute! Something to do with being shy in each other's company? Simply a good year?

"Easy," he says. "It's for eating." He's right. The answer is simple, all you have to do is find it. Great wisdom.

"You still no believe in God?" he asks. I stall for time - *forwarding and stevedoring* - and want to continue to read poetry at the office. Much too serious, all this. Reading poetry.

"And the women?" I ask. The snake, the apple, knowledge and all that, some of it has obviously stuck.

"You take one look," he says. "And..." He checks to see if we're alone and zips his thumbnail across his throat : "You've had it." Dear, dear,... one simple look? How interesting, the confrontation with other cultures.

"Throat slashed," he says. "Understand?"

"Oui, oui, j'ai compris." I immediately understand my friend. We've known each other long enough now, and need but a few words. Something tells me, for example, that it would be a bad idea to bring the Sufis into this. No, no, I will not broach the subject. We know a thing or two about keeping mum in Flanders. We're not the by-fire-and-sword type.

"I wish women did wear figs," I say in an attempt to show him the light-hearted me. But it doesn't work.

"How you live as a christian?" he asks, "if you no believe?" Hold on a minute, I think.

"I'm not engaged in any trade," I say. "Not in products, not in money. Okay? How shall I put it, on Friday we get a fresh load of fish in, which is good in connection with... the Ten Commandments and all, I say to myself."

"You do not trade and you live in a town!" I've blown it, I must admit.

"No," I say. "I have no faith. I'm an outlander too. Not a cow. A pig, a ram, not a sacred lamb." I don't say anything. He doesn't say anything. As I've said, a few words suffice.

"And a touch of Johann Sebastian Bach," I say, for I hate silences like this. "Unser Leben ist ein Schatten."

"Repent," he says. "And buy yourself a *pre-owned Merc*. Diesel, dirt cheap." It'll solve my problems sharpish. He's right too. I'll be running a trade in no time. The car first.

Story number thirty-three. Remember the man with a camel and the other without? Exactly!

"You're not so young yourself," he says. Friends do not mince matters. "Then, you grow old and have no faith, no trade, no car. And no younger wife!" I consider the matter. Such infinite wisdom.

"You stupid sod," he says, the man from Mohammedania, my worried Mussulfriend. We laugh.

I repent and come across my religion in everything. In the others, in my relatives and their relatives. I buy myself a car, a *pre-owned Merc* and engage in trade. Diesel costs next to nothing and one fine day this young woman falls into my lap. The sheer energy! I'd forgotten about youthfulness. See! I told you!

As it turns out, however, this is but a wet dream. I tell my friend what I know about the international capital market, the global food stocks and the weapon industry.

"Did you know," I say, "that when an arms plant converts to a toy factory, not one single job is lost. And that's just one example."

"You communist?" he asks.

"My Flemish family fought against other Flemish families," I say. "The same way those selfsame Flemish families fought them and Russian families. My Flemish family fought alongside Jewish families against German families. Alongside Spanish and Russian families they fought Italian and Japanese families. And all those years your Turkish family lived alongside other Turkish families on sheep rearing and prayer and the light on the mountains." That's what I said.'

Raven

The first question God should be asked upon appearing is : 'What is turbulence?' (after James Gleick, *Chaos, Making a New Science*, New York, 1987.)

'Why would I not be divested of writing? I did grow up with no clue as to who I was, didn't I? Anything else? I shed my first language like a snake its skin.

And my second language? The sculptor and I meet up by the museum entrance. He's just a wright, he claims. No story, this time. He's come up with this contraption, for example, that interlocks or interlinks and is noble or useful, he says, a window that can be opened and closed and opened again.

He shows me the delicate Japanese paper that flutters over the stubble field.

"See this exhibit?", he asks. The rain will strike it down, the sun wither it away, the soil decompose it. I see his work and I see the world. Preserve this image, do be cautious with things. Listen to what lives outside logic. Look, there isn't going to be a civil war. The library is not being burned but read.

The paper sculptor takes me to rooms E and F. How, when I was still young, did I cast off the shackles of my body as well as my standards? Where did I find the strength to resist the terror of being in the right, the authority of the truth, the brutality of each justified action? This is his second work.

The light dances within a limited volume. I have come eye to eye with incandescent brass. It's almost like I can feel the wall of air. This is his third work.

Art-lovers stride past. Their faces are the same colour as their raincoats. They snap at me in their red and blue hats. In play. I bark back courteously, I know my place.

We go outside. Oils on canvas between birches. Boredom, erosion, threat. Four. Iron and the sun on top of a hill. We live by the Celtic Sea. I count the water.

“Let’s go inside,” the canvas sculptor says. Where we find rims of dried up ink on small stone plates. Five and six.

“Is that how you’re going to review it?” he asks. “dried up ink on small plates?” He laughs loudly and gives old names to the used materials : rice, brass, lactic acid, porphyry. I count the fire.

A guided tour walks past. An introduction is being listened to.

“I wonder what the artist meant.” I shed my second language, speech. I follow the cracks in the overheated, dried out walls. Flaking height.

“What do you reckon the guide means?” Visitors shuffle on. *English, German, Italian.*

Mist takes hold of the park. *Netherlandic.* The museum smells of asters. People get cured here. The seventh work.

We say goodbye at the entrance. A father is telling his child how many people are serving time in gaols.

“Thousands and thousands all over the world?” Starlings on the tympanum imitate the little girl’s words. Raking-light strikes the late summer. I shed my third language.’

Preservatives

‘We’ll call it a day shall we, and finish with the odd Picturesque View, from the inmost recesses of our memory?’

‘Such as?’

‘Le Grand Théâtre (Souvenir de Bordeaux); Vichy, Le Parc, vue prise de la Terasse du Casino. La Maison de Madame de Sévigné. But maybe you’re partial to the optimism of the pre-industrial revolution? There’s little point in focusing on poverty in our picture, is there? Memories and history should be selective is what I say, and we certainly don’t want to obstruct the view.

Theben, Pressburg (Donau-Album); Viaduc de Grandfey (Souvenir de fribourg); Galleria Vittorio Emanuele, Cortile del Palazzo Marino (Ricordo di Milano); New Post Office Buildings, Crystal Palace Sydenham (London Album).

Are you getting my drift? Or are you saying : “Surely you could have been a bit more explicit. I don’t want it spelled out in a physical formula or an amount in my bank account or anything. Simple words will do. Or will they?” Something along those lines?

'Oh for the taste of tinned food!' That's it. That's how it begins. To be recited almost ecstatically. Do pile it on. You are, after all taking a roll. Please don't overdo it. That gives it a humiliating and horrible edge. *Oh well*, never mind.

'Fresh veg every day of the week. That, you mean! But Sundays there was never any time. Tinned food - what a treat!'

The next bit should be pronounced in a slightly lower tone and with plenty of breath to spare. It sort of takes off at the end. The angle changes.

'I belong to the increasing world population. Without food preservation my ancestors would never even have been conceivable, let alone ready for literacy. Remember the universal single vote system, the start of compulsory education, and what they brought about. We think we master the three Rs. Discipline and conduct. Imagine the consequences of all this in a parliamentary democracy.

This between brackets.

Let's start with the conquests, or - as we tend to say - the discoveries (which were, in fact, conquests) by the Germans Koch and Liebig. And the Frenchman Pasteur. Not to be confused with spices, of course. People do, occasionally, without rhyme or reason.

This subject spans a different period altogether. Take world history : endless tribal wars amongst indigenous communities, the silk route, slave trade and most of all the gold stocks of the European royal families, essential for keeping their mercenary armies. It takes a foreigner to subject another foreigner, if you see what I mean. Which costs money, hence the levies, tolls, taxes. This in passing and so far those spices. In short : pineapple is imported but it is not a spice.

The chemical industry literally skyrocketed, (comma) and fruit extracts and concentrated, tinned stock - powdered soups appear later on - so, as I was saying, the female population was suddenly able not only to spend less time in their kitchens and vegetable gardens, or yakking away at the vegetable market, etcetera etcetera. But also - could the back rows please pay attention - they could now redirect their energies to developing (*Aufbauen* in German) the national industry. (Such as the iron and steel industry, where finished products are manufactured, but most of all the chemical industry : geared, amongst other things, to developing tinned foods.

As it turned out, the major European wars virtually decimated the male population, remember the introduction of conscription under Napoleon, (I will be coming back to the French-German wars later on, the Confederation of the Rhine and the Continental System have already been dealt with). Consequently, women suddenly had less problems finding jobs. Wars stimulate the production and the invention of *Ersatz* and synthetic materials. The more we destroy, the more we get to produce. This logic is downright evil and we would, of course, be much better off with a society geared to the general satisfaction of needs. But that is not how it works. Occupying a competitive position on the international free market, that's what it's all about. Those of you who took part in Conservation Week will, of course, remember how we discussed durable development and, amongst others, recycling those self-same synthetic materials. But let's not digress and get back to our preservatives.

As I have already stated, preservatives put mothers in a position to leave their places at the fireside and take up their places in industry. Here's an easy way to remember : custard powder equals emancipation. From soups, however, it was but one small step to dairy products, it's the principle that counts. Economically too, new wars posed less of a threat, since women could now go and assemble bombers instead of breastfeeding their children, in a manner of speaking. Just trying to establish a link.

As a result, the need for kindergartens arose, then crèches etcetera, you know more about this than I do.

That is why the good old taste of tinned foodstuffs - I know, time's running out - still lingers and not only dictates our choices, but also largely determines how we behave.

Do bear with me! What about the taste and colour of chewing gum, lemonades, condoms and the like?

Quiet please! Honestly. Good, if that's how you want it : Ms Baetens, what happened when Germany was no longer able to import rubber?

"Something with synthetic petroleum...?"

"Close enough, as usual."

In one word, Ms, Sunday was tinned-food day!"

At this point the actress may take a breather. After which she should resume, with feeling.

"To this day the aroma still conjures up the taste of the past. The Cold War, for example, the excellent history lessons, the roses and foxglove in the school garden, Flemish brass on window-sills and whatever fills the promising days of one's youth with joy. A blazing sun at the beginning of an afternoon off! Shall I tell you something?"

'It's not a story then?'

'No, not a story, it's too grim for that. Fifteen years on, in Zeebrugge, I found myself in a restaurant and was served this heated up tin of liquid flour. That's how long it took. (What took so long?) My palate disintegrated, preservatives pared down the inside of my head to the nasal bone. Some *bisque*! Neon lights shone their white glow on the green napkins and red dyed pollack. With my naked brain I stood calculating marginal values for my health. My umpteenth host suggested a blood test. The doctor took a urine sample.

"As you know, we never have enough iron and money," he said. *Quel homard!* It was winter. He froze some of my blood. That's exactly how long it took.'

'You're speaking in riddles!'

'It took ages before I even began to grasp how important preservatives have been in my life. When you're young, history lessons raise but a corner of life's veil.

Before that, as I was saying, I mean the period which historically preceded my ignorance, in the days when all the traces of the German -- and allied bombings had not been erased from our landscape and our memories yet, or as people say, when the pain was anything but relieved; by the way, ever taken a magnifying glass to those technically inferior war photos? Well, that is why I meticulously kept all imported tin wrappers. Plus all the pictures. They were called chromos at the time. I grew up with them. Some had been collected by my grandmother, in fact.

I'll give you a few examples, shall I? We don't want people to go claiming that my line of reasoning lacks coherence, do we? I seem to hold a reputation for that. While I actually make a point of scrupulously drawing links. Talk like the man next-door and you never get asked any questions. Mutual links? You must be joking. No situating things within a certain context there. Easypeasy. Fair enough. That's exactly why I have decided to use texts and illustrations which - years ago - were distributed to the younger generations by world famous firms. Whenever I want to stress the importance of tinned foodstuffs, that is.

1. Arbres Fruitières, Récolte des noix de coco. Depuis la fondation de la Compagnie Liebig, en 1865, le total des abatages représente environ

5 500 000 têtes, d'une valeur approximative de 425 000 000 de francs. Cocoa will remind some of you of spices, I know.

2. Les Explorateurs Célèbres, Andrée. En 1897 il conçut le projet d'atteindre le pôle nord en ballon. Bon-Point décerné à l'élève... Consultez votre médecin sur le sirop Deschiens à l'Hémoglobine, prescrit par plus de 30 000 médecins les plus éminents du monde entier dans l'Anémie, la Faiblesse, la Débilité, la Convalescence etc. Interesting point of comparison, wouldn't you say?

3. 1885-1886 Monsieur et Madame Dieulafoy, explorateurs français, découvrent dans les fouilles de Suse (Perse) la frise des Lions faisant partie de l'ancien palais d'Artaxerxès. Dying for a nice cup of coffee? Ask your grocer for "Golden Bee", genuine in packets bearing the trademark only.

Hardly surprising, is it, my veneration for the colonies? They were spoonfed to me straight from the tins. Talking imports : the way to our hearts was definitely through our stomachs. Civilization boils down to contagion, is what I say.

I dreamt that one day I would get hugely rich in the Mandates. I worshipped my South African Brothers who had courageously preceded me to the Cape, even though I did occasionally find them a bit strict. It's not as if those Bushmen could read or write, is it? Where would they have learned?

I propagated the poems of my Frisian Fellow Tribesmen. I so wanted to start civilizing folk on those distant rugged islands! See what a broad world view I was developing, even in my simple and modest Flandres by the Dender?

Except for the physics classes.

Like so many others I was eager to be posted abroad. My cultural heritage did stretch from Geraardsbergen to Surabaya after all, from Overboelare to Paramaribo! From one World Expo to the other! Remember the first portable battery operated radios? Surely this technical development would pave the way? And the World Services!

"Consider the noble Mohican

He gets all his jollies from peekin' :

From watching while bears

Carry on their affairs,

And the rooster seducing the chicken."

I was an avid collector. Booklets, newspapers, postcards, old leaflets. "Long live the Liberation and the Victory over Fascism". Should I keep my voice down, or display that classic Flemish reticence that has been handed down to us since the Spanish days, the French days, the Austrian days, the Dutch days perhaps? You do realize that those famous peoples did more than just murdering, don't you? That they also reproduced in these parts? Some even enriched the language. Not the Spanish, but the French and the Dutch, for example. Many foreigners seem to have forgotten this.'

'Time to move on to story number thirty-one.'

'Is it now! *For ages the duke had been fighting Ghent the free city.* No, that's not how it starts. No, seriously. Time has moved on, we're talking centuries after Johanna van der Gheinst now, the attractive peasant girl from Nukerke, mother of Margaret of Parma, governess of the Low Countries.

The real story starts the moment I gorge myself on pineapple juice with preservatives and burst at the seams. Or so it seems. Now there's history for you.

I must admit I don't like linguistic particularities. And I do know that one little letter can change the meaning of a semantically adequate speech act. I, for one, was in for some serious welding. No, not gelding, thank you very much. The story has certainly marked me forever. With surgical seams and all.

This incident by no means alleviated my hunger for *artificial flavours*, synthetic sweeteners and most of all the bitter and indigestible acidity of chemical preservatives. Civilization : my be-all and end-all.

To this day, I still long for America, for example. Whenever I played with my brother, my sister and their friends I invariably chose the Indians' side. When the cowboys attacked, I snuck through the high grass along the bank of the Dender. I always got caught, though. That was because the others forced me to hide in ambush. I've never been good at hiding, in ambush I mean. I had to let them look up my skirt.

As a squaw, the boys claimed, I had no right to struggle. Only later did I find out that, historically, this was not true. In their game I was simply the easy prey. I plaited my hair - which they loved - and married the strongest of the lot to escape a worse fate. My brother occasionally tried to free me, but he usually got scalped in the process. The cowboys have inflicted great sufferings on our family. To make things worse, my sister got so scared that she defected to their side. I mourned our lot by the Great Tap. The earth grumbled.

Yet I have always longed for the day that I would set foot in the New World from the steamship on Illustration N° 4, Series 7. This haven (literally) would become my haven (figuratively). As the Americans say : *my heaven*, a paradise (literally and figuratively) of music hall, crime, science, money, poverty and civilization. But most of all of pineapple juice and tinned fish. I saw this little flag right by the quay. A man's body had just been dumped into the water. Another fresh load of tinned meat had arrived, putting more women in a position to take up their places in industry.

What better place was there for me to go? My mother had already arranged a marriage in Geraardsbergen with a fertile law student, a son of hard-working citizens who lived in a detached house with a black marble hallway. Cowboys.

I still remember the boy. I still remember how I, the Indian squaw, was imprisoned in the White Castle by the Big River! His men put me on the bridge and the rack. He looked on, crestfallen. His clothes were the nicest, so he played sheriff. Not that the sheriff had anything to say, mind. His men looked up my skirt and shouted : "Us catholics, we go to confession so we get to go to heaven. But you, heathen, are damned and will be made to purge your sins the rest of your life!"

Most of them had joined the catholic youth movement. Shyly, they pointed out my knees to each other and said : "Look, a curse has been put upon her." After which they screamed in my ear : "What will it be : death or forced labour?" I did enjoy being the centre of attention and usually opted for forced labour. "Like on the white man's banknotes," I said. As soon as they had ridden away on their horses along the Dender, I would play on my own, a film star posing on Brooklyn Bridge for a famous weekly. I fancied I had been given the leading role in a film that got all of Geraardsbergen in an uproar. You saw my knickers and the magazine wrote that I seduced American boxers and nestled in their warm, soft bodies each night. At long last the chilliness in my intestines would ebb away. The old water of the Dender and the flooded pastures evaporated from my young bones forever.

I have told all this to my ancestors' ghosts and the dead pines in Norway, the roses in Sussex and Wales and the blossoming mimosa near Lake Lugano. They have answered that they see a woman in a house overlooking a bay. Sailors are putting to sea. There are ripples on the water and the woman sees the ships tracing white lines on the water. She grows wheat in her garden. She keeps carps in a pond. She carefully dries brushwood, the hedgehogs and woodpeckers know her. She talks to them. On arrival, Ms...'