Language Without Me

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p 78-93

Herman often recounted the following fantasy. He has died and up in heaven his mother is informed that her son is on his way. She hurries to Saint Peter and manages to arrange that Herman can stay on earth a little longer, on condition he attends mass dutifully every Sunday.

When he told it, Herman's shoulders used to shake with laughter. I used to shake my head. Because Herman was playing Russian roulette with his health, knew what he would be told if he had himself examined: no more cigarettes, no more alcohol or at any rate less, no more black coffee or at any rate less, more physical exercise, less working at night and sleeping through the day. After his death, in one of my darkest moods, I wrote in my notebook: `I've lived nine years with a dying man.' The man who had been laid out, the man my reason told me was Herman, looked like a seventy year-old. An old English lord, said a woman neighbour. Recalling his last meeting with Herman, Jeroen Brouwers wrote: `Herman was wearing an extremely smart suit, his shoes gleamed like his spectacle lenses and hairless pate. He looked like death warmed up: skeleton-thin, pasty-white skin, glazed eyes. There was something wrong with his teeth - his teeth seemed much too

wide for his narrow face. In his left hand he wielded a spherical glass of auburn beer, in his right the eternal cigarette, so that handshaking gave rise to some confusion. His bony hand felt like something from the deepfreeze. General impression: he was tired, he seemed extinguished.' (NWT 1997, 5/6, p.34)

This description employs a degree of poetic licence, but it is not simply plucked from of the air. Herman did look tired and old, and he had lost a lot of weight. He was eating very little, finding it more difficult than ever to get out of bed. After his death, his family and friends speculated endlessly about whether or not he had known that his days were numbered. Yes and no, is how we usually concluded that pointless pondering. For years already he had been living with pain in his chest, in his back, in his lungs, called that pain his cancer he had to walk off, a cancer for which he

definitely did not want to have himself examined, he knew well enough what he would be told: no more cigarettes. Herman preferred to drop dead.

A day seldom passed in which we did discuss his health. He always resolved to less of this and more of that. Once I managed to get him to a doctor. That doctor told him he had to give up smoking. After his death I went to talk to that doctor. I was intending to give him a piece of my mind (`You could at least have examined him!') but I ended up listening to an account of the evil

effects of nicotine. These are definitely impressive. It makes quite a lot of men impotent. Whether Herman had to contend with that? No. Absolutely not.

A good three weeks before his death we were in Budapest to give a reading at a Dutch evening at the university. On the day we were flying home we first went for a bath in the magnificent Gellért Hotel. I was lugging our suitcase upstairs and downstairs through the hotel, when he asked me: have you gone completely crazy?, took the case from my hands and carried it

quickly and nimbly to the bathing cubicles. The bathhouse had a swimming pool, but there was no way he was going in that. First he went for a serious sweat in the various steam baths and then he enjoyed a good long soak in a scalding bath. But swimming? No way.

One evening, after a whole day spent roaming the city, we were walking back along the Danube to the apartment where we were lodging. I was the one who at a certain moment said: there's a taxi, let's take it, please, I can't go on anymore. He would have been perfectly happy to carry on walking, said once he had walked off that cancer of his, he could go on for kilometres and

kilometres. Not that he often did that: you mustn't take it to extremes. Herman practically went to the toilet by car. But in the old days, before my time, he went jogging, ten, twenty kilometres, every evening. And in the army he was one of their best runners, allowed to leave the barracks to go training.

Five months before his death we went to Austria on a skiing holiday and he wanted to return home the very first evening because I had asked him not to smoke in bed. We came up with a compromise. He stayed. Said the mountain air was good for his lungs. There is a photo of him in the hotel with a cigarette clamped between his lips and to the left and right of him a sign saying `No smoking'. During the daytime he succeeded in smoking less, went walking with a cigarette between his lips and was allowed to light it in a mountain hut as a reward for the effort. Then he raced all the way back to put all that healthy walking behind him as quickly as possible.

He found the United States a perverse country; a country where smokers were treated as the new pariahs, where you had to go out onto the balcony to smoke in the freezing cold of a New York winter. But when we were visiting American friends, all those so-called non-smokers used to come to him and coyly cadge a cigarette. He used to sit there the whole evening rolling and dealing out cigarettes.

Once I tried to make Wednesday our swimming day. Just for an hour, nice and cosy, relaxing. I managed to get him to come along just the once. He stood there at the poolside, refused to swim. Much too healthy. He swam on paper. Called a collection of poems Breast Stroke. And in Gigaro on the South French coast of course, there he swam lengths of the swimming pool, went snorkelling in the sea. See the many snorkelling poems.

On holiday with friends in Turkey we discovered a beautiful beach. We took a room in a hotel (he transported it in a poem to Troy/Truva, where we had not spent the night but which we did visit) and spent the next day lazing around in the sun, that is to say, he lazed around in the sun, I went walking. Afterwards he wrote a column about it: about how this aptly illustrated the difference between prose and poetry. That a prose writer has to cover a distance - `put in her kilometres' - whereas the poet simply observes, enjoys and sees that it is good.

An American friend called the poem `Juniper Tree' a self-portrait. She said it was about survival. Herman himself had never seen it like that, but he found it a clever interpretation. In a certain sense she had given him that poem as a gift. We had seen juniper trees when we were visiting the national parks of Utah, Arizona, Nevada and New Mexico in her 4x4.

Juniper tree, Canyonlands

Ten years of dust and a crevice are all

it takes to strike root in rock.

Twisted amuck,

it hangs as crabbed as tall.

It's mostly dead, for sure,

but this is how it can endure.

Here it stands like Zadkine's

Orpheus, playing a lyre

of wooden strings, old and wild

with silence.

Too many limbs, too slow, too.

But despair is grafted with desire.

I do not think Herman had visited a doctor behind my back and knew, as it stated in the autopsy report, that arteriosclerosis had seriously clogged his coronary artery. I do not think he knew he would never make it to the twenty-first century. But I do believe he had been overcome by a certain despair. Despair and desire. I think he knew that even his mother could not convince Saint Peter to grant him a stay of execution.

The Friday before his death he returned by train from Groningen, where he had been doing his stint as guest critic at the university. He lost his wallet along the way, noticed this just before the train pulled into Berchem, dived under the seat to look for it, missed his stop as a result, and could only get out in Mechelen. There he was given a document stating that he was `a lost passenger' and was therefore not required to buy a new ticket. The wallet - lost? stolen? - was never found. A lost traveller without money, cash card or identity papers.

On the Monday - Whit Monday - the police station was closed, so he got up early on Tuesday - the police station is only open in the morning - to apply for a new ID card. This means he had a short night on Monday, then stayed up almost twenty-four hours, then slept two hours, then left for Lisbon, where he stayed up until at least one thirty - in the letter he faxed me he wrote one thirty, which is two thirty Belgian time, but perhaps he had not yet put his watch back an hour. On Thursday 22 May he came down to breakfast at around nine thirty. On the way to the opening session of the congress Hugo Claus asked him: `Did you manage to get some sleep?' To which he replied: `Yes. Well actually, no.'

On Wednesday morning, before I took the train to Brussels to teach my class there, I quickly checked whether the alarm clock was properly set. I looked at his sleeping body, thought: there lies somebody who won't be leaving for Lisbon. He had been in bed less than an hour and had to get up again an hour later to catch his plane. I stood beside his bed shaking my head, thought: De Coninck, De Coninck. Because who goes and makes a night of it when he is expected in Lisbon the following day? In the evening I sent him a fax to which he wrote an answer at one thirty or two thirty a.m. He sent it the following morning at ten fifteen - eleven fifteen in Belgium - and a little later I tore off his fax when I came downstairs to make some tea. A quarter of an hour later he was dead.

Wednesday night, 1.30

Kitten,

It is nice enough here and the people are friendly - but I miss you. Nobody here to say `remember when...' to.

We went for a delicious meal this evening, in a new neighbourhood, a sort of Lisbon South, on the Tagus, overlooked by a gigantic (illegible word) Christ on the opposite bank. Old harbour shed converted to restaurant. Afterwards a few more drinks in a frightfully seedy neighbourhood, or so it seemed, in a sort of ground floor loft: fantastic.

Got an interview tomorrow morning about my poetry, for the newspaper, in English. I'm curious. Veerle Claus says she'll pick us up from the airport on Sunday evening.

Kitten, I love you and I miss you. Kisses.

Herman.

There are hardly any photos of him in which he is not holding a cigarette between his fingers. He rolled his own cigarettes with `De Toren' tobacco. Lucky thing I sold him the last few packs before he left for Lisbon, said the woman from the newspaper shop, he was my only customer who bought De Toren. Herman always got in a stock before he left on a trip. The packs sent back to Belgium in his travelling bag now lie in a little glass-doored cabinet in my bedroom, next to his glasses, his pens, his shaving brush, his passport, his watch, the bottle of Jack Daniels he bought in the duty-free shop at Zaventem airport, his Eternity aftershave, a Christmas present from his daughter. I open the cabinet door, a breath of husband.

Herman belonged to the generation for whom the first cigarette was part of the rite of passage from child to adult. The fanaticism of the antismoking lobby used to make him fume. In Fingerprints, his last volume of poetry, he wrote:

Just as I like garlic with my lamb,

so give me tobacco with my air: to spice the breath

and only then to blow it out, as if each

were my last.

That because of that tobacco that last might well arrive frighteningly fast is nowhere to be read in the poem. Quite the contrary, smoking is just as natural as flavouring food. Garlic is even supposed to be good for the circulation. However, in the following stanza, completely unexpectedly, he writes:

I've traded the transient for the eternal

often enough in my verse

to know that the transient is for me.

Ultimately the one does not exclude the other: thanks to the tobacco in the air he breathed the transient became a just touch more transient.

Our house was steeped in smoke. Every beam, every board, every plank exuded his tobacco breath. Through cracks and chinks and pores it seeped from room to room.

Getting up at two p.m., then a bath or a shower, then a couple of telephone calls or a trip to the office, reading the newspapers, doing the shopping, cooking, eating, watching television with Laura. After dinner, strong coffee made in his espresso pot or espresso machine. The workday proper begins at eleven p.m. with a first glass of whisky or a first Duvel beer. He allows himself seven units, according to an intricate calculation I have never completely mastered. If he sticks to his seven units he has no hangover, but more often than not he drinks eight, sometimes nine, even ten. He drinks very slowly, one unit per hour. Eleven p.m. until six a.m.: seven units exactly. Or one extra. One to break the habit. Sometimes he is still sitting working when I get up. We drink tea together. Usually he works until four a.m., then listens to some music with the `pots' on, his word for the headphones. If I get up during the night to go for a pee, I can hear his music - lots of Schubert, Chopin, Beethoven, Mozart, Satie, Dvorak, Mahler, Brahms, Poulenc - and the lightning ratatat of his keyboard. Sometimes I go downstairs to say hallo. `Come to bed. Please.' - `Yes, yes, I'll be up in a moment. No, no, I won't stay up late.' It is four a.m. Sometimes he gets a bad fit of sneezing, stands in the kitchen exhausted sneezing and sneezing. The sneezing wakes Laura. Not me. I sleep through everything.

Herman and death. In 'Across the Lethe on foot' he quotes `No se puede vivir sin amar'. (One cannot live without loving). And follows this with:

Nor die without her.

Unless she's looking at you, it isn't even true.

The next poem says it even clearer:

And then He created a pair of eyes –

so she can see him while he dies.

So he can finally have the right.

Herman, raised in the fetters of the great `you must', of rules and regulations and principles, longed for the freedom of a great `you may', the `you may' of the funny, frivolous, playful girls of The Lithe Love, to be allowed to live greedily and wantonly, and finally be allowed to die, be allowed to lie, the nothing anymore, the nevermore having to.

Maybe this is the ultimate inversion he engineers with his poetry: that death becomes something for which he longs, for which he hopes to be given permission. The last woman in his life. The woman in whose arms he died. The woman who said `you may'.

I was that woman and I was not that woman. In a literal sense I was not that woman. He did not die in my arms. I did not hold his hand, did not close his eyes. But I think that at the end of his life I did give him permission not to go to a doctor, not to have himself treated, not to live more healthily. I think that I said `you may'. The evening before he died I consulted a doctor myself. My whole body was hurting, especially my lungs, my chest, my throat, my sinuses. In my fax to Lisbon, I drew him a sketch showing where the pain was. I drew my lungs and windpipe, because I had an inflammation of the trachea and thought he would not know what `trachea' meant. Actually I had not known it myself until that evening. Perhaps I was feeling his infamous cancer empathically, who knows. Whatever the case, I had given up fighting. I said `you may'. In every fight there comes a moment when the exhausted combatants throw in the towel, long for the outcome, even if it means their defeat.

Herman died on the terrace of a café in Lisbon. He and a few colleague writers were on their way to the opening session of a literary congress at the Gubelkian Museum, but he felt unwell and wanted to go back to the hotel. Anna Enquist walked along with him because he had called out to her. Later, in a letter, she described how it happened: `On the street beside the park - the Rua Marquès Sà da Bandeira - Herman dropped back a little. I was walking along talking to Tessa and Herman called out to me. I looked back at him. He said he wasn't feeling well, was thinking about going back to the hotel. "I'll walk you back part of the way," I said. The way you used to be allowed to walk somebody home from school when they were feeling ill. I told Tessa I'd arrive a little later and Herman and I turned back. He looked tired, ashen. "I want to sit down a moment," he said. There was a small terrace with silver-coloured chairs. He sat down and took off his jacket. I sat down right next to him because I thought he was going to faint. He told me he often felt wretched in the morning, that his lungs were not yet fully up to speed then - after a while it always got better. The woman of the café came to take our order, I asked whether she would bring a glass of water. Herman was growing paler and paler and I shouted to the woman that she should call

a doctor. Then Herman began to slide to the floor. His eyes rolled and his muscles twitched violently. I screamed: call an ambulance - and she did so immediately. I protected Herman's head, pushed his chair aside and laid him on the ground as best as I could. My right arm was under his head, with my other hand I tilted his head to the side so that the airways would stay open. He shuddered and lost consciousness. All the while I was whispering in his ear, I forget what I was saying - that he could just lie there peacefully, that a doctor would soon arrive, and always his name. The muscle spasms subsided. The café woman brought a towel, we laid it under his head.

I kept on holding him, rubbed his hands and arms. Then suddenly he opened his eyes, turned his head a little, looked at me. I am sure he recognised me. "Oh, you're here," he said and closed his eyes again. He was lying there peacefully, his arms bent, his hands on his chest. I was holding his one hand and had my fingers on his pulse which was very, very weak. All the time I kept on talking to him: yes, I am here, we're waiting for the doctor, I won't leave you, you just lie there peacefully - that sort of thing. A woman who turned out to be a nurse had stopped. She spoke English. She knelt down opposite me, I asked her to feel Herman's other pulse. We looked at each other and we both knew it was over (...) Herman wasn't in pain, and he didn't seem anxious. I was scared, but he was actually calm. His last words sounded a little surprised, astonished. Nor was he short of breath, he wasn't clutching at his chest or his throat with his hands, he was just lying there serenely on the small white paving stones, almost as if he was going to sleep.'

Shortly after his death a stone commemorating him was set into the pavement. At its unveiling I spoke to the woman of the café. She said she would never forget that day. She had brought out a glass of water for Herman and then he had slid from his chair, right into her arms where he had died. - Oh, I said, and what about that other woman? - Which other woman? - The woman he was with. Didn't she... - It was in my arms, the woman said resolutely.

Even at the moment of his death they fight over him, said the friend who accompanied me to Lisbon. - Especially then, I said, especially then.

Somebody had to hold his hand while he died. A woman had to do it. It was his great fear that he would have to die alone. That there would be nobody there to hold his hand. Will you be the one who holds my hand? is a constant refrain in his letters to me. It was not I who held his hand. But there was a woman. There were even two.

Herman and women. Herman and I. It is easier to write about his poetry than about his life. Perhaps I also want to keep that life a bit to myself, even though snatches have already ended up in poems. Or perhaps I am not sure where to begin. With the verse that Benno Barnard wrote on a card when he heard that Herman and I...? Herman had written to tell him. Benno was in America at the time and Herman had written that he was with that writer, that Hemmerechts from you know what. And so Benno - who had meanwhile heard the news from three other correspondents - wrote the sort of verse that Benno effortlessly dashes off: `His bollocks creak, he is bald and grey, but

his pillar of salt keeps the cold at bay'. Or should I begin with the episodes of Heimat, we watched together every week? With the characters we talked about as if we knew them? Or with the countless evenings when we took it in turns to pour out our heart, he about his divorce, me about my children? Or with what Herman wrote to the people in Zaire who had invited him there for the opening of a book fair? Whether he could bring along his girlfriend as a human condom? And how they then looked at me there with raised eyebrows, as if I was indeed a human condom? And that in Zaire Herman began to realise how much I was in love with him, a love he could not resist? And that he therefore also decided to fall in love? First a little, then a little more. Herman fashion. Cautiously bit by bit. How I think it happened in Kisangani, where I went skinny-dipping in the consul's swimming pool - the consul Lieve Joris writes about in Back to Congo - because I did not have a swimsuit with me and besides it was already dark? The consul who poured whisky for Herman at his bar and told us wonderful stories about his colonial days. And Herman who later recited poems about snow and burst out laughing. Snow in Kisangani!

Shortly after his death I wrote the sentences: `No, it was never ordinary, you never became ordinary, not even after nine years of living together, you were always extraordinary, a monument I sometimes managed to get to do ordinary things with me.' Things such as: shopping at the Makro,

cleaning the door handles with brass polish, going on a winter sport holiday, attending a communion party in West Flanders, going for a walk. Especially that latter was a testimony to great love. He hated going for a walk.

When I had only just met him, I waited in nervous anticipation for the moment when he would do it: write a poem. To me poetry was magic. A mystery. Actually it still is. Later I realised that there was not a particular moment. That his poetry grew out of a continuous process of polishing and scrapping and tinkering and trying-out.

I remember a day at the beginning of our relationship when I was lying in bed waiting for him to wake up. Benno was visiting and sleeping in the bedroom next to ours, and suddenly I had to think about all the unwritten books that were lying slumbering in the house.

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p 104-109

Herman and nothingness. Where could he best cultivate this `nothingness'? In the café at night; wearing his headphones at night; at his desk at night with a glass of whisky within easy reach; in the arms of a woman; in death. La petite morte and la grande morte. On 7 May 1997 he wrote in a letter to friends: `Actually I find life a little too hectic. And soon, afterwards, there is suddenly nothing anymore. After my death I shall have plenty of time. But then apparently there is no time.' The idea of being able to combine the pleasure of life and the peace of death did however appeal to him. As always, he succeeded on paper. See for instance:

Quietly, half a dozen times in my son's dreams, I've

always wanted to go like this. To die

until I'm simply still alive.

The following poem was printed on his obituary card:

Port-Cros. Slice of moon like a C.

Ten grave churchyard. Where I want to be.

Daughter'd rather be cremated.

Not me: I fancy lying down.

I want a vault to myself

with nothing left.

And for it to be a century later.

Two doves on two gravestones. Tinkling

of leaves in a glimmer of light.

Calder. Musicless music.

This is where it's good to be. Or not.

Herman's exercises in detachment are fundamentally ambiguous. In one of his poems he writes `Zen: if you've got a bike, leave it where it is' but he immediately adds: `so you can arrive where you are'. He searches for nothingness because in that nothing he hopes to find everything; he searches for the nowhere to discover the everywhere. `Everywhere' must be looked for `here'. `Having something' is so precarious that you can better begin with very little. Or precisely with very much.

Wish List

Give me Nescio and Chekhov, old books.

Give me someone to hear the bald facts

of my umpteenth voyage, to smile and say,

while pulling out two of my hairs: you're going grey

Give me all and say: it's nothing.

Give me nothing and say: that's all.

Give me myself, give me you.

I've been searching for what I wish I knew.

So give me what

I've had all the time.

He wants to live as slowly as possible, so that he can enjoy his life to the full. He wants to outwit the 'now' by holding himself ready, extremely cautiously, carefully, expectantly, tentatively, patiently, to welcome the now.

It's two minutes to go

till now. I summon up this moment.

I take a pull on my cigar and say: So?

In Gigaro, where we holidayed every summer, he used to sit out on the terrace evening after evening with a book, a cigar and a glass of cognac, but actually he was primarily studying the lizards and how they hunted moths. He used to report on them every morning. Something most people would barely notice could fascinate him endlessly. The plants in our garden are another example. In the spring we used to go and look at them every evening to see how much they had grown. The ginko was a particular source of abiding wonder.

The young gingko's the prettiest,

a mass of little hands begging the rich daybreak

for a drop of dew, which they hold

till evening in their palms.

He possessed the talent to be almost endearingly happy about little silly things, a new sort of pen he had discovered, his new espresso machine, a jacket he liked, the wisteria, the cat, the tasselled cords that tied back our bedroom curtains. To him this little was staggeringly much. He saw literally the whole world in that microcosm, those grains of sand.

He expressed this philosophy most clearly in the two sun bed poems that close Fingerprints and hence acquire the import of a testament. I quote the first:

A sort of nothing, that's what I need. What's left

after trying to drink from cupped hands:

your hands. Scents amble through the garden.

I've got a deckchair beneath me; in it I'm lying as low

as I can lie in myself, on my back, the lowest I have.

So what is it like, lying here? Pouring a measure of brandy by holding

the glass horizontal, that's what it's like. I don't need much

myself to be full: little is what I need the most.

There's too little little. The forgiving

nothing we'd fit like a glove, if we

were nothing too.

The air's as blue as forgetting.

The air's as blue as the blue powder

clothes used to be washed in, to make them whiter

I begin to suspect that here Herman is simply devising an explanation, or call it a philosophy, that will give him permission to lie in bed very late, then take a long soak in the bath, so that as soon as the weather is more or less favourable he can then transfer to his garden. Laziness is transformed into savoir-vivre. Into Zen. A garden is meant for lying in.

Elsewhere he writes:

– What do you think you'll do today? – Nothing.

– You did that yesterday.

– No, that was a different nothing.

(...) Thought I'd grow old. But when

you're old you'll be past it anyway.

(...)

In other words, he also knew he looked older than his age, and he certainly felt himself older, but that was not the result of an unhealthy lifestyle, oh no, it was a conscious decision.

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p 146-149

I now live in the house where I used to live with Herman, the house that was previously his house, and even earlier, the house where he used to live with Lief, Tomas and Laura. When I first came here, all those years ago, I did not know which cupboards and drawers I was allowed to open, which rooms I was allowed to enter. I was aware I was stepping into the life of somebody else, using objects she had used, most probably had also bought. Sometimes I took a bowl from a cupboard, felt her arms in my arms. One morning I pulled open the drawer of my bedside cabinet, found a pack of photos of An, looked at them, put them back, pushed the drawer closed. A house with a past. With a history that was not my history. A history that willy-nilly has now also become my history.

The garden was tidied up, the house refurbished, room after room was wallpapered or painted, ending with our bedroom. We bought a new bed, the bed he calls an empty poem in Fingerprints, we put up new curtains tied back with tassled cords. Herman slept in that bedroom eleven months.

Now I live alone in this big house, sometimes sit here, and sometimes there, can't really find my place - after all, there is nobody to tell me `here'. I feel like a visitor in a museum. The Herman de Coninck museum. Perhaps there are too many photos on display, too many framed poems hanging on the walls. One of those poems, the poem about our bedroom, was sent to me after his death. Herman had asked somebody to make a lithograph of it, said he wanted to surprise his wife with it. I received it a week after his death, together with a copy of his letter and a covering letter from the man who had made the lithograph. In Herman's letter stood the sentences: `(...) it would make a good present for my wife, a surprise. I have a few things "to make good" and that sort of thing helps.' It was certainly a surprise.

The poem now hangs beneath the one Benno Barnard wrote for Herman's fiftieth birthday. In my bedroom stands the little glass-doored cabinet containing his things, and the box of my babies'. On the wall hangs a portrait of Herman, painted by a friend. Against the wall stands a sheet of glass with a poem that Herman wrote for Jan Fabre. I can't imagine how anyone else could ever come and live here, how would they not feel crushed by so much past?

After his death I tried to wear his wedding ring, as befits a widow, but it was much too big, slid from my finger. Shortly before the anniversary of his death I brought both our wedding rings to the goldsmith who had designed them and had them made into a single ring, and so now his ring also sits securely on my finger.

Some of his things I try to use myself, a pen, his keys, his desk and desk chair. Very occasionally I put on one of his sweaters.

Often I stare at the chair where he usually sat, try to understand the significance of that simple fact: a chair in which he used to sit and in which now he never sits. As if it has something to do with that chair. As if that chair with a bit of good will could again let him sit there. The

naturalness of him sitting there, so that you could walk over to him, cuddle him, ask him something, kiss the crown of his head.

A friend drops by, says: It is a goddammed magnificent house. I nod, say: I've lived here nine years now and each day anew I think it's a magnificent house. That is also partly the problem. The house is bigger than its inhabitants. The house is not there for its inhabitants, we are there for the house. You always feel a bit like a visitor here. A guest.

In awe, I say. Do you know that expression? To be in awe? I am in awe of this house, of this space. I feel privileged that I am allowed to move through this space.

And Herman? he asks.

Herman belonged to the house, and the house belonged to Herman. Do you remember how Penelope tested Odysseus? He returned home after twenty years and she did not recognise him. He insisted he was her husband, but she wanted conclusive proof. So she suggested he moved the bed. That is impossible, he said. - Why is it impossible? - Because I made that bed and because I know that it cannot be moved. It is made from a tree-stump with roots deep in the ground. Penelope smiled, knew that the man she held in her arms was truly Odysseus. Herman was that tree-stump. The house had grown out of him. He had grown roots in it and the house had grown roots in him. The house and the garden. Perhaps the children think about me that way, I say. They come and they go, eat the meals I cook for them, sometimes stay the night, take a bath or a shower, leave again. But I stay: I have put down roots here. In their eyes, at least. Somebody has to want to live in this space.

Sometimes I consider switching on all the lights, putting a CD on repeat, turning on the heating and leaving the house; giving the house back to itself, making a monument of it, the tomb Herman dreamed of, the mausoleum of the life that Herman and Kristien shared, a monument to absence.

22 May, 1998.