

Moon and Sun

Stefan Brijs

An extract pp (9-24)

Original title Maan en zon
Publisher Atlas Contact, 2015

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Michele Hutchison

© Stefan Brijs/Michele Hutchison/Atlas Contact/Flanders Literature – this text cannot be copied nor made public by means of (digital) print, copy, internet or in any other way without prior consent from the rights holders.

p 9-24

18th July 2001 – 19:25

Where shall I begin? With who? With Max, whose flight is taking off from Hato at this very instant and who, in a few moments, will see the blue and red bars of neon light down below, behind which the girls of Campo Alegre are imprisoned?

Or with his father Roy, who has already been put to bed at this hour and sits staring at the portrait of his wife Myrna, lit up by the streetlight shining into his small bedroom through the half-closed shutters.

‘She was a good woman, brother, and reaaal pretty.’

Or with Sonny, Max’s son, who is undoubtedly looking up from his watch and turning his gaze upwards, searching for the blinking light that will soon be moving through the stars in a north-easterly direction?

No, let me begin with a song, an old Antillean children’s song, sung, stammered, garbled by a group of old people, this morning in the lounge at Pleasant House, where Max was saying goodbye to his father.

‘I’m off to the Netherlands, *pai*. To pick up parts for the Dodge.’

‘What parts?’ Roy asked. His loud voice attracted more attention in the room than the singing of the nurse who had put on the song. Max, on the other hand, was only paying attention to the sounds of Papiamentu.

‘Luna ku solo laga mi pasá kon todo mi yu ku Dios a duna mi.’

I saw the way he stiffened when he heard the words: Sun and moon, let me pass with all the children God has given me.

‘Which parts, Max?’ Roy repeated.

Max turned back to his father and said, 'Door handles for the back doors, front bumper and a wing mirror.'

'In good condition?'

'In excellent condition, *pai!* I've seen pictures. Not a spot of rust. And you can comb your hair in the chrome.'

'And straighten you' tie, Max. Never forget you' tie.'

Max had stopped wearing a tie a long time ago. 'Will do, *pai.*'

Roy thought it a good idea. He understood his son like no other. Anything for the Dodge. He wasn't surprised at all by Max flying all the way to the Netherlands for it. In his elderly mind, the kingdom was hardly further away than Aruba where he'd spent part of his life and during the Second World War had picked up the American English he peppered his speech with.

Lucia, Max's wife, had been incredibly agitated when he'd told her about his plans.

'The Netherlands? For old scrap? Have you lost your mind? Have them send that rubbish by post!'

'Customs steal everything, Lucia, they're gangsters.'

'And who's going to pay for it?'

'I've been saving.'

'You were saving for Sonny! For his studies! Not for that wreck!'

'That wreck puts food on the table. If I don't fix it up, we'll be left with nothing. Nothing!'

'So you go to the Netherlands? *Mi morto akibou!* Over my dead body.'

'Then I turned and walked away with great pain in my heart,' Max told me. He rested his large hand on my chest. 'I love her. She's everything to me. She and Sonny. *Luna ku solo.* Will you say that too her when I've gone? That she's the moon who brightens my dark night.'

Max's sensitive soul. His inner self couldn't be more different from his father's. He had inherited his powerful physique, though. But Roy's body was being eaten up by the rheumatism. His fingers, toes, hands and feet, back and neck, everything had become twisted over time, the steel cables of his muscles had snapped, fibre by fibre, the joints had fused into lumps that pulled his skin so tight it had become pale.

'When you get back from the Netherlands, I'll take you for a ride,' Roy said to Max just before he said goodbye.

They'd been making a habit of it. They'd drive right across the island. I'd been with them a few times, sitting on the backseat with its hardened, crumbling leather, even the springs had given up squeaking. It's an experience, seeing old Roy in his old Dodge Matador, his window down, the

angular elbow of his right arm pointing outside – a side spoiler of skin and bone – his bird’s claw resting on the coachwork, his intent gaze staring out ahead and the wind ruffling his silver curls as soon as the sedan gained speed and followed the twists and turns in Roy’s memory once again.

‘Left here, Max.’

‘You can’t anymore, pai.’

‘Do it. Do it!’ Roy, screaming like a child and Max driving into a one-way street, hooting loudly to warn any cars coming the other way.

‘And now to the docks, Max!’

In his earlier life, the docks had been one of Roy’s posts. When the tankers containing the Venezuelan oil for the Shell refinery sailed in, Roy would wait for the crew to take them to Campo Alegre, the red light district next to the airport.

‘Their trousers around their ankles before they’d even stepped out of the car,’ Roy liked to recount. ‘And I had a deal with some of the whores, you know. Ask for Henna or Chica, I’d say, and say Roy sent you. *They do all?* They’d ask then. *All the things you can’t do at home, my brother.* And then they’d be generous, even more so when I picked them up later and they’d discovered I hadn’t lied. *Thanks, man. Here, keep the change.* When there was still money to be earned. Actual American dollars. The real stuff.’

Roy had kept two of those copious dollars, two old, one-dollar coins. The pictures on both sides had been worn off by the magic trick he must have performed at least a thousand times.

‘Look, how many coins are there? You can see two, right? Pay attention now. Watch carefully.’

Then he’d press the coins together between the balls of his thumbs, making them slide over each other in short, fast rubbing movements so that it looked as though there were three of them.

‘*Brua!*’ he’d shout then. Magic!

He’s eighty-eight now. No doctor thought he’d make it this far. He was only in his fifties when he got the first symptoms of his illness and at a certain point his lung muscles were also supposed to become affected, causing him to slowly but surely suffocate. However, only Myrna and I had known this. They’d never told him. But our fears hadn’t come true. His breathing hadn’t let him down for a moment. And now ninety was in sight.

‘Then we’ll dance the rumba, you and me, honey,’ he said to every nurse who mentioned his coming milestone. His back and legs might be as crooked as a dividivi tree, but his male pride was unaffected. So this afternoon, he tried to wrestle free of Max’s arms when Max went to hug him as they said goodbye, and when he didn’t manage, he shouted loudly so that the entire room could hear, ‘Stop this carry on, son. You’re no *mariku*.’ Not a homosexual.

Max didn’t persist. He let go of his father and gestured to me. Can we leave now?

The first time I met Roy and Max, forty years ago, a very similar scene had occurred. Roy had been forty-eight at the time. Max was a boy of twelve, I was twenty-five. It was 1961, my first year as a teacher in Barber. I'd been allocated the sixth and seventh classes, thirty-one boys between the ages of twelve and sometimes fifteen, in all gradations from brown to black – a white man in Barber was as exceptional as a black man in Emmastad or Julianadorp, the districts where Shell's Dutch employees lived in their comfortable homes. But even more exceptional than a black man in our district was the brand new Dodge Matador that had stopped in front of the school gates one September morning that year. Brother Tinus, the headmaster was standing there about to ring the bell for the start of the lessons when Aurelio Rodrigues, a beanpole of a boy from my class, saw the car driving along the sandy road that lead to our school.

'Look! Look!' Aurelio cried, attracting the curious eyes of all one hundred and sixty boys in the playground to the car, whose impressive tail fins on either sides of the boot were conspicuous from a long way off.

'Like a shark gliding over the land towards us,' Mr. Frank said, describing the way the shining sedan slowly descended the hill. Because of this, we heard the Dodge's growling later than we saw it.

When the driver stopped at the school gates and playfully pressed the accelerator to the floor, the engine roared so powerfully that all the boys who had hurried over, jumped back in shock.

The Super Red Ram, Max explained to the class later that day, an indestructible eight-cylinder with the power of 295 horses. I knew nothing about cylinders, but that many horses meant something to me, more than to some boys in my class who asked Max whereabouts in the car all those horses could be hidden.

The driver got out. A tall, muscular black man. He was wearing a uniform cap, white gloves, a spotless white shirt and a narrow, black tie, black trousers with a neat single crease and patent leather shoes, not even dusty from the sand. Just as my habit showed I was a brother, these clothes indicated that this man was a taxi driver, which was confirmed when I looked at the Dodge's number plate, which featured only the number 7. The man walked around the car, quickly and discreetly tapping Aurelio's fingers, since he was about to rub his hand over the shining, sea-green paint of the bonnet, and opened with a grand gesture, the door on the other side to let the passenger out. Not only myself, but also my colleagues imagined that Queen Juliana was about to step out of the car or at the very least Mr. Speekenbrink, Governor of the Dutch Antilles. That was until a boy of about twelve years of age got out, as black as the driver and with the same tall build, but not yet the tight muscles, and wearing worn clothing that made him look all the more lanky. He stared shyly at the ground, his shoulders drooping, undoubtedly wishing he could have made an inconspicuous entrance on foot, like the poorest boys at our school. His father, because we'd figured that out by now, pushed him forwards, tapping Aurelio's fingers again in passing, this time a little harder, and called out to me and the other teachers that he'd be back to pick up the boy again soon. And pointing to the top of his head, he concluded with, '*Su nòmber ta Max. Max Tromp.*' The boy's name was Max. Max Tromp.

We saw Max turn around and clumsily attempt to wrap his arms around his father. He pushed him away pitilessly and said, in American English. 'Grow up, Max, you' no chile anymore.'

To the many boys in my class who were growing up without a father, a loving gesture from Max would have been deeply meaningful, but now all their attention automatically turned back to the Dodge Matador. The man sat down at the wheel again and drove away, as slowly as he'd arrived, back up the hill, with a throbbing noise that, as it faded, became increasingly drowned out by the wild, enthusiastic cries of the boys who'd clustered around Max in large numbers.

When Roy came back to pick up his son, the playground was abandoned. Max had had to wait on a bench in the shadow of a mango tree, a cloud of flies that had been attracted to the ripe fruit buzzing around his head. His mother was going to move from Saliña to Barber that day, but Max had no idea where they were going to live. His father had only informed him that same morning.

'The landlord wants to kick out your mother,' Roy had told him. 'And you with her. But that won't happen, son, I have my pride too. My children aren't going to sleep on the streets. No way. If Roy has to accept his responsibilities, he will. Have I ever let you down, Max? Never, hey? Never ever.'

That was why Max stayed sitting there, that afternoon under the mango tree.

'My father will be here soon,' he'd said to me, pretty much every quarter of an hour, each time I'd asked whether he wanted to come and wait inside the classroom.

Max hadn't told us much about himself that first day, more about the Dodge.

'Automatic transmission. Two-speed Powerflite. Torsion-Aire suspension. Astrophonic radio with three transistors and push-button controls. Eight point zero zero fourteen inch tyres.' He rattled all this off in the same American accent as his father. The other pupils understood none of it, but not one of them let that show. To them, Max's words sounded like incantations.

'How fast does it go then?' everyone wanted to know.

'Yes, Max, how fast does it go?'

'A hundred and twenty miles per hour,' Max said without hesitation and much conviction. The boys let out cries of admiration and I took advantage of this to give them a problem to solve; for the first time they were deeply motivated: How long does it take a Dodge Matador driving at top speed to get from Oostpunt to Westpunt, a distance of thirty-eight miles?

If Max had been able to solve this, many of his classmates would have seen him as a demigod, but like almost all of us, he didn't know the answer.

'Arithmetic is not important, Max. Just as long as you can count,' his father sometimes said. Like many taxi drivers he'd adjust his fares to match the clothing or other external characteristics of his passengers.

'Poor people wear gold in their mouths, rich people around their fingers.' This was typical Roy. A simple man but with a clear view of things, nourished by a certain inquisitiveness, whereby he continually managed to combine pure curiosity with genuine interest.

He was like that too the first time I spoke to him when he came to fetch Max from school. He stopped at the school gates and hurried around the car to the back door, which he opened for Max, as though he were a customer. Max quickly slid into the car, as swift as a lizard, whereby Roy closed the door. As soon as he saw me, he tapped the rim of his cap with his cotton-clad hand in greeting and asked whether Max had behaved himself. No apologies for being so late.

‘As good as gold,’ I said, truthfully, and loudly enough for Max to hear above the sputtering sound of the stationary, turning engine.

‘Like father, like son,’ Roy said with a broad smile. He started to walk around to the other side of the car.

‘There are a few formalities to straighten out,’ I said. ‘Perhaps you...’

Roy shook his head. ‘His mother deals with all that kind of stuff. I’m clueless. His mother. Myrna Cortés. I’ll tell her she needs to come. And ask for Brother...’

‘Brother Daniel. Sixth and seventh classes. Max is with me.’

‘Roy Tromp.’ Before shaking my hand, he pulled off his right glove by tugging at each of the fingers briefly in a practiced movement.

‘His mother,’ he repeated then. ‘She has just moved house. There.’ He gestured in the direction he had just come. ‘Myrna. She’s a good mother.’ And then, to Max, ‘You’ve got a good mother, don’t you, Max?’

Max nodded curtly. He sat there frozen in the passenger seat, his hands folded in his lap.

Roy started to move again but after two steps he slowed and turned to me, this time with a voice that contained both curiosity and amazement. ‘Do excuse me, Brother, but are you a *yu di Kòrsou*?’

Whether I was a child of the island? It wasn’t the first time I’d been asked that question.

‘No doubt about it,’ I replied. ‘Born on Bándabou, grew up in Boka Samí.’

‘Then you must be one of the first black brothers from Curacao itself. I’ve never met one before.’

‘I’m afraid I’m even more of a rarity than a Dodge Matador, Mr. Tromp.’

My reply suited him. He smiled a big smile, rested a hand on the roof of his car and said, ‘Call me Roy. And if you ever need to get anywhere, I’m your man.’ His hand disappeared into the breast pocket of his shirt and he pulled out a small piece of paper. A telephone number had been scribbled on it. ‘Just call. Half a day in advance. A friend of mine. Not from the company. They’re crooks. And ask for Roy Tromp. Taxi number 7. A sacred number, isn’t it?’

‘The number of the perfection of God’s ways.’

Roy looked surprised. 'The perfection of God's ways. I'll have to remember that.' And walking around the car he repeated the words again to himself, before turning to Max as he stepped in, 'Did you hear that Max? Number 7. The number of the perfection of God's ways.'

He sat down at the wheel, rolled down the window and gestured for me to come closer.

'One more question, Brother. Is Daniel your real name?'

A brief shake of my head. 'My spiritual name. After the prophet Daniel.'

'The man in the lion's den?'

'One and the same.'

'You must have been thinking of our island,' he said with a wink.

'Daniel was a paragon of virtue and wisdom,' I explained. 'I try to model myself on him.'

Roy whistled between his teeth. 'Virtue and wisdom. Well, I don't think I'll ever make a monk.'

'It's never too late to repent, Mr. Tromp. And you already have the necessary self-knowledge. That's a good start. What's more, I see you trust in the good Lord.' I pointed at the plastic rosary he had hanging from his rear view mirror.

'Oh, the Lord keeps my car on the straight and narrow, brother. Never had an accident. And I've racked up some mileage.'

'The Lord is a good guide, Mr. Tromp.'

'He is for sure. I pray to Him sometimes, you know. And if I get the chance, I go to church.'

I didn't know whether he meant it or whether he was just trying to get into my good books.

'Happy to hear it. Maybe I'll see in you Barber's church in the future then?'

'Maybe. Depends how long this boy and his mother stay here.' He nodded at his son. 'I'm looking for something better for them, isn't that right, Max?'

Max still didn't react, he sat there staring ahead awkwardly.

'He's getting impatient,' Roy said apologetically. 'I'll take him home. Pleasure to meet you, Brother Daniel.'

'The pleasure's all mine, Mr. Tromp.'

He started the engine by pressing a button on the dashboard and leaned one last time out of the window. 'Like I said, if you ever need to get anywhere, ask for taxi Tromp. Number 7. What was it again? The number of...'

‘The perfections of God’s ways.’

‘The perfection of God’s ways. I’ll never forget that, brother.’

And he drove off, slowly accelerating so as stir up as little sand and dust as possible.

Roy had found Max and his mother a small house in the *kunuku*, the wilderness just outside Barber, no electricity, a rickety tin windmill that jerked up groundwater. It was surrounded by tall cactus candlesticks, thorny *wabi* bushes that even the scrawny, errant goats avoided, and dusty, yellowish-grey sand that blew in through the broken windows, into the two rooms, one to live in, the other to sleep in, under a leaky roof made of corrugated iron. Myrna would reconcile herself to this situation, even though she’d had something different in mind when Roy had turned up in Saliña in his new car to take Max to school and then her to a new home. But there more than ever, in her *kunuku* house, she’d cherished the hope that Roy would move in with her now he was taking care of her and his son after all these years, and him saying this place was only temporary, that he’d quickly find them more comfortable living quarters, made her all the more hopeful. Naturally nothing came of it. Roy’s promises were as numerous as they were fleeting, but he also had the gift of being able to convey them so convincingly that almost nobody doubted his words, certainly not the women whose bed he shared. He had eleven children by seven different women. At least, that was what he told everyone around the island. There was no one who doubted his claim since a black taxi driver with his own car was admired and respected, and planning his route so that after he’d brought home one woman or other, he’d have at least an hour or even the entire night free, was child’s play.

‘I can find my way into women’s hearts blind,’ he said to me when I brought up his conquests. The fact that I consciously distanced myself from feminine charms was something he found incomprehensible on the one hand, and had endless admiration for on the other.

‘You don’t let yourself be led by the fire in your loins, and that’s very good, Brother Daniel, a man can lose his mind in a woman’s lap.’

Whether I hadn’t ever been drawn into temptation? Of course he asked me that.

‘You must regularly go into the homes of your pupils’ mothers. And they are often so lonely and so, you must know what I mean. I can imagine...’

‘I’ve made a deal with God,’ I interrupted him. He understands the word ‘deal’ better than anybody else.

‘Oh, yes, I see.’ He reflected briefly. ‘But then you’re sure to reap the rewards in heaven.’

‘Another reason to lead a sober life on earth, and that goes for you too. And to take good care of your children, as well, for instance. All eleven of them.’

I said it severely and slightly reproachfully and that must have made an impression on him because the next time we saw each other, he brought it up himself, ‘Do you remember saying I should take care of all my children?’

‘All eleven of them,’ I repeated emphatically. I leaned forwards slightly and, in the rear view mirror, I saw slight desperation in his dark eyes, the rosary swung back and forth.

'Well, brother...' He swallowed audibly. 'How can I say it...? There... there are only four.' He said this last bit in English and I got the impression he was avoiding his mother tongue to make his confession easier to take. I gestured that I hadn't understood.

'Four, I've got four children,' he said in Dutch. 'With three women.'

I myself became aware of relief, he sat there like a beaten dog.

'It's stays between the two of us, right?' He glanced at me briefly. I reassured him, whereby he told me the other seven children had been attributed to him by their mothers, in other words, he wasn't the one telling lies.

'They think I'll support them. But when I give them money for the children, they buy new shoes or expensive necklaces or earrings for themselves, or they go to the hairdresser's. No, Roy is good but not crazy. They can say I'm the father a hundred thousand times more, but I know better, you can spot a Tromp a long way off.'

I only knew Max and the likeness was indeed striking, just as it would be instantly apparent in the next generation, in Sonny.

'And I'm interested in those four children, brother, really I am. I didn't let Myrna and Max down when they ended up on the street. No way. The men I know, make a baby and are gone for good. And if they come back, it's to make another baby.'

'One wife, one family, Roy, that is what God prescribes.'

'I know, but this is Curacao, you know, the sun, the sea, the trade wind, it makes our blood boil. And the women, ay ay, we are their playthings.'

That last bit was true. Lots of women did it on purpose. I've often been round to their houses, the single mothers, I'd take along bread or clothes or soap, and time after time I'd impress on them not to have any more children, only to see them pregnant again at my next visit, this time they'd found true love, he'd stay with them, and they'd had lots of presents and he was sweet and kind to them, and then after a few months they'd be left with yet another screaming baby. Always the same old story.

'Never again, brother Daniel, never again,' they'd say then. 'I swear on my grandparents' grave.'

All things considered, it didn't do Roy any harm having so many mothers claim that he was the father of their children. Those were the times when a man's status was measured by how many women and children he had.

'Men must be strong, women gentle and pretty.' You heard that a lot.

And because of this, Roy was respected all over the island, though he rarely showed up in public with a woman or child. He didn't pay any attention to them at all. Max was the only one he looked out for sometimes, but that was mainly due to Myrna, who managed to bend Roy to her will now and again, with great acts of willpower and charm. The only thing she didn't manage in all those years, was to get him to move in with her. Only rheumatism managed that; it was more relentless towards Roy than she could ever have been.