The People Healer

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Carabouya, carabouya
Everyone must live,
white and black, carabouya!

PART 1

THE WESTHOEK

1

The essence, there may exist something like the essence of the Westhoek. Perhaps it is a spirit, a daemon, a genius, which does not exist as a body and yet creeps into and dominates the West-Flemish landscape. This spirit seems to manifest itself ever anew: in the houses, the villages and along the side of the roads. It is as if the spirit is always rearing up and descending on the flat landscape. In an ethereal way. Perhaps the movement happens through sunbeams, thrushes and larks, or as an almost inaudible drumbeat, or via another metabolism or circulation. One can hear it panting between the words the people say, in the corpus of sentences and stories that people tell each other.

If this spirit has a way of manifesting itself, it is probably in them: in the stories.

There are also people who can detect the spirit in the thick fog that hangs about in the Westhoek. Like a blanket of ash. Like the torn shreds of old curtains. In the wisps of mist over the fields under the autumn moon.

The spirit.

This spirit, the genius, the daemon or what are we to call it?

What is a daemon actually? What do we call the power that enraptures someone or sends him roving restlessly, across the borders of generations, continents or even civilisations?

That resonance is there in everything that is said in the Westhoek. It is a soft purring drum roll, only noticed by a sensitive observer. Perhaps the rhythm, the resonance is laid in the earth via the tracks of hares. Hare prints.

That would be a nice theory: that old stories descend with each hare's foot and rise again in everything that grows. Multifarious, ineradicable, every year anew. These stories lose themselves in petals. Soft red, blood red petals. I mean poppies.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

'Or in cornflowers, that's also possible,' said uncle Marcel grumpily, rubbing his hand across his forehead. Eyelids closed trembling. '*Larks*, what are they then, lad?

'They're *leeuweriken*, uncle.'

'And *amid*, what does that mean, Remi?' asked uncle Marcel.

'*Tussen*, uncle. The poem says: the larks sing bravely, they fly, but no one can hear them amid the noise of the weaponry. We learned that poem by heart at school.'

'By heart?'

'Yes, because we hadn't done any English in class yet.'

'So that's what that poem was about,' said Uncle Marcel, dabbing his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief. 'That's what it's always about. Everywhere there are secrets and missions, sad memory traces. No one owns them, so they hang around between people. Do you know why?'

I didn't know.

'Too much has happened in this area.'

He pointed into the distance at the three hills in a row: the Kemmelberg, the Rodeberg and the Zwarteberg. Apart from that the landscape was flat. A sheet that had been pulled tight. Sometimes the barns seemed to float above the fields of grain; at the slightest hot spell the air shimmered. Electricity cables hopped on stilts to the farmhouses and everywhere farmers were at work, even in the heavy rain or when a lashing wind got up from the sea.

Uncle Marcel said: 'Our area is doomed. The spirit scorches everyone with anthrax.'

'What spirit, uncle? What is anthrax? Why doomed?'

'The spirit is invisible, but it is composed of the remains of bodies. The spirit looks at us from its face that has been shot away. Its stories rattle like a magpie, they twitter. They whistle like a grenade that has been fired.'

I said nothing.

'Remi?'

'Yes, uncle.'

'Anthrax is the name of a soldiers' disease.'

I looked into the sun at my uncle. Why was he speaking like that, with that dark frown on his forehead?

'It can't be helped.' He blew his nose, slowly folded the handkerchief. 'Remi, it can't be helped,' my uncle repeated soothingly. 'We pass it on because we are family,' and he listed the names of men and women. He threw them angrily in my face.

The spirit is speaking through him again, I thought.

They were the names of members of the family. Some of them were under a tombstone, others were still alive. My Uncle Marcel, with his small, elegant moustache, stuck out his wide chest, directed his impenetrable gaze a little higher. He rubbed his hands at length. 'When we farmers work the land, the spirit takes hold of us. It is an invisible giant that exhausts us. When we sweat, our sweat stinks of it.'

'A spirit in our sweat? How is that possible?' I asked.

‘The spirit gives us palpitations, and stomach problems. If I die of cancer, it’ll be because of it.’

A spirit? A giant? That’s impossible, I thought.
Anyway, Uncle Marcel wasn’t to die of cancer, but of pneumonia.

One

A spirit, a genius, a daemon? What did the old professor mean by it? The list was like a line of poetry, a line from a classical poem, a poetic list of three different mythical beings.

The professor nodded encouragingly.

The spirit, the genius, the daemon: I understood it to some extent as the feeling that kept coming over me in the Westhoek. The professor, whom I must immediately address by his first name Remi, sometimes told me of a giant who hid in the fog, a monster that consisted of the body parts of dead soldiers.

Again Remi nodded as if I had just said something, but that wasn't the case. He told me about the conversations he had with his uncle as a boy of ten.

Only after a while did I begin to see it clearly.

The old professor looked at me with a superior gaze. The weekly visits to him made me nervous. To my questions about certain difficult phases in his life I received answers such as: 'It was monotonous, not necessarily boring.'

Or else: 'It was so normal that it wasn't humiliating.'

2

Whenever my Uncle Marcel started talking about the spirit I couldn't sleep. My room was bathed in the warm, grey light of the full moon. A distant dog barked hoarsely three times. Next to the house the fire of potato tops was still smouldering; I could smell its earthiness even up in my bed.

Outside the sheets flapped, blown by the night wind. The spirit. The spirit is whispering in the washing, I thought.

The breath of dead soldiers, Uncle Marcel had called it.

Perhaps my uncle was right. Perhaps such a thing existed. It was that strange fog. When you walked along the fields in the evening, there was suddenly an improbable tower of dancing midges above your head. Thripses that suddenly attacked you. Swarms of starlings and back-flipping plovers making nervous drawings in the air.

What do those signs say?

What do you call the signs when they appear in such a ghostly or stubborn way? Ghosts?

Perhaps you also hear the spirit speaking in funeral bells in the distance.

When the blackberries were ripe they were full of black blood, I believed. That black thought was enough to make me not dare to eat blackberries any more. When there was a strong wind over the fields, always from the west, I also thought of the spirit.

Fearfully I rode my bike along the protective hawthorn hedges.

Our farm was remote, in the hamlet of Den Abeele. Four hundred metres from the main road. The closest neighbours lived half a kilometre further on. Two hundred metres beyond our farmhouse was the national border with France. You could tell from the colour of the roofs: the blue-grey tiles were French, the red Belgian. It was lonely there, although in the border region there was lively smuggling trade in the country lanes. Smuggling was a sport in this area, an honourable source of additional income for the farm hands.

'Smugglers? I haven't a bad word to say about them,' said my father.

Everyone was a bit corrupt, he knew that. Unobtrusively farmers like him protected the small-scale smugglers. The customs men drank themselves to death on freebies and tips.

Smugglers wore wide blue coats, with big inside pockets sewn into them: they stuffed these full of white beans, tobacco and bottles. I always had the fright of my life when a smuggler emerged from the dusk with his linen bags on his belly and back. Sometimes three or four of them at a time would appear in our yard. The disappeared into the barn without a word; they sat hidden in the chaff and waited.

'There's a strange silence in there,' I said to my father.

Father said nothing.

'What could it be?' I insisted.

'Nothing. If it's quiet, it's nothing.'

'But sometimes I do hear something.'

'A broody hen. Or a rat in search of a sweetheart.'

When there was a storm, the beams of our barn groaned like a human being.

Close to the border my father and mother, Omer and Bertha, ran their mixed farm. They had three children: daughter Agnes and two sons, Joris and me, the youngest. Uncle Marcel was the elder unmarried brother of my father Omer, and helped out on the farm as a permanent hand. He was also my godfather.

In the morning, my father looked at himself in the mirror. Sticking his chin out. 'Good morning,' he said aloud to his own round face. Blue eyes, short dark hair. He laughed at himself. Immediately afterwards he dived under his cows to milk them. In the cowshed there were twenty-four units of dairy cattle with Catholic women's names. There was also a champion bull, apart. Best breeding bull for miles around. Weighing a thousand kilos, top prize bull in West Flanders.

My father could tell from the eyes of his animals if they were sick or on heat. At night he stood by the side of the vet, at quickly executed Caesareans, with the tearing cows and the far too large fat-arsed calves. If they had to saw the calf out of the cow, the blood flowed. My father liked this hard, fruitful work, and his stubborn livestock.

I helped my father when he took the bull out of the shed. The irritable animal snorted: a cow was led into the yard. Father controlled the bull with a metal bar, attached to its nose ring. He forced the horny, dangerous animal into obedience. Dutifully and with dedication the bull mounted the cow, which was standing with its hind legs in a shallow hole. I looked at the groaning and juddering of the monstrous body. There was something strange about those cramps. Feet apart I stood next to my father. He was large and weighed a hundred kilos. He manoeuvred the bull expertly, keeping the animal's excitement under control. For an instant I saw father looking at the stains and spots on his clothes. Did he see the cow shit, or didn't he?

Two

The professor had told me about the fog of the Westhoek, the way it swallowed up their farmhouse and shut if off from the world. I knew the image and the description because I myself had driven around in my car at various times in the Westhoek, almost feeling my way. The fog was for me an image of the spirit. It was about forgotten stories that no one must rake up.

'You'll never fully understand this,' he whispered during his story.

And yet. Sometimes, so I imagined, this spirit also appeared to me when I stayed in the villages of the Westhoek. I saw the spirit creeping into the houses, the people. It lived in them, exhausted them and hence became more powerful. It made the people sweat. Their image of themselves became hazier. The spirit wormed its way into the smallest shoes, even children's shoes. I imagined him as a hunter, a grumpy old king and his subjects had been weighed down and were for ever inhabited by it. The spirit was ponderous in nature but not malevolent. It stared into the dark. Especially in fog it stared at me too.

(I was already starting to talk and think like that Uncle Marcel.)

3

‘Did you shut the meadow gate properly?’ asked my mother. I was already on my bike. ‘Is the gate shut properly?’

‘Locked with the double chain,’ I called. Our dog Mirza ran with me beside the field of grain, in the direction of the French border. I glanced round. If my mother saw customs men circulating she would wave a duster or a mop out the upstairs window. That was a sign to the smugglers. If the border road was safe, she would leave the shutters open. Everyone knew, including the customs men.

I cycled along the Gemeneweg, also known as Chemin Mitoyen. The road with the double name was right on the border: it was neither Belgium nor France. On my bike I swerved from left to right and back. From home to abroad and back. I imagined that I in that way I could grab hold of the border and shift it, like a curtain of rain moving across the fields. From left to right and back again.

A hundred metres further on a hare was playing the same game. The hare also ran from left to right and back again. He waited for me for a second and then spurted ahead on great Meccano legs, from left to right and back.

I slowed down. The hare stopped too.

I rode on, across the border. Now the hare fled across the field in panic. Mirza had been waiting for that signal; baying, he chased the hare at full speed. The hare ran in angles to deceive his pursuer, but Mirza sped in a straight line for his victim. As if the dog knew which side the hare would choose. Mirza grabbed his prey by the neck and bit. The hare did not move a muscle. I threw down my bike at the side of the road and ran up to them panting. I took Mirza by the scruff of the neck until he let go.

In the hare’s body I could feel the anxious heart beating. In my fingertips I felt the dark-red confusion of the hare’s blood. Then this happened: I gave the hare a push, and in so doing set the hare mechanism back in motion. The animal raced away. I prevented Mirza from chasing it.

In the morning at the breakfast table I started on about it. I told them what I had experienced as a dream, and that in my dream I had felt the heartbeat of a hare. With my forefinger I tapped the rhythm on the table top,

to tom to tom to tom.

‘Nice dream,’ said my mother.

‘I was already dreaming that we were going to have hare tomorrow,’ growled my father.

‘Pay no attention to him,’ said mother.

The hands called her *la dame Bertha*. As a little girl she had been a war refugee, three years in France. The fact that she was weak was connected to the malnutrition at that time. But her French was splendid. My mother, Bertha Mabesoone, had seen more of the world than ordinary farmers. Occasionally she wrote in a diary that no one was allowed to read. At family gatherings on my father’s side there was a buzz of puzzlement: ‘Who on earth is that woman?’

‘Bertha came from France,’ it was said.

My mother liked to hear agricultural engineers talk about modernisation. Whenever someone dropped in at the farmhouse, she brightened up: she wanted to go through all the news and information in the paper with them. On the farm, she looked after the cows. She treated the animals cautiously and firmly, almost in a friendly way, sensitively even. At milking, she quietened the moody animals by calmly talking to them. On Sunday she went to the first mass with the children. She sang to the Virgin Mary: ‘Love gave you a thousand names,’ and then went home to prepare lunch.

Meanwhile the men were in the pub, my father too. After the sixth or seventh pint of beer they pushed back their trilby hats, to cool their sweating foreheads. They, the farmers, goaded each other on in their ambitions. They invested in ever larger agricultural machines, bought extra land

from the smallholders. They talked with admiration of their cousins who had emigrated to France, Canada and Australia.

At lunchtime father came home, with red cheeks. He put two Côte D'Or chocolate bars on the edge of the table. Mother had cooked, but father fell asleep as soon as he sat down. He said: 'It looks as if I'm asleep, but I'm not. And if I am, it's because I'm tired.'

He had his nap stretched out on the sofa.

'It's the only time papa goes out,' said mother benevolently.

Later in the afternoon, Aunt Maria, my mother's sister, came for coffee in turn. While they darned socks or sewed curtains Maria went through the items of village gossip. She commented openly on my father's drinking. At four o'clock there was coffee and white bread with ox sausage, blackcurrant jam and cheese.

Three

I must first explain how this old professor bewitched me. It's coming up in fragments, like with the psychiatrist. And yet it had all begun simply. I thought I should resume my university studies, there was a dissertation I simply had to finish, but I found myself in a story that spans a hundred years and covers two continents. This story is about a world that has long since vanished: a farming existence that has disappeared, and a colonial past that is scarcely comprehensible now. I want to evoke the century that has gone, and in between I shall tell you what happens when someone dies, what are called spirits, and how superstition and certain objects function and can guide us.

How can we explain certain things? We call ourselves rational beings, don't we?

Like what happened last night. You'd say: at night the house finally cools off, but I noticed that the house was illuminated from within by a warm glow. I had a nightmare: I was dead, I was lying in a funeral parlour. I got up and looked at my own shadow on the wall. I could easily draw it. In the moonlight I appeared to myself like another man, with a blue light around my head, and what I drew was a black version of myself.

Over forty years since I had studied with him I rang my professor, and immediately recognised his voice. Slightly hoarse with traces of West Flemish in it. I asked if I could come and see him.

'Yes, do that and just call me Remi,' he said. 'Come.'

He had recently retired, and now had a practice as a psychiatrist.

Remi's face had scarcely aged at all. He laughed, said that he no longer wore a moustache, a moustache I had obviously not even remembered. We briefly exchanged memories. He had followed me, since I had mailed him each book that I wrote. By now there were twelve of them, and in return he had always sent his academic articles.

'Why do you write actually?' asked Remi very directly. 'What does the art of writing mean to you?'

I could not give a clear answer. He said that he admired my lightness, my playfulness. Then he used that word that was still unfamiliar to me, and that I still cannot explain simply: *malice.*

My very first meeting with Remi was that of a student and professor. At university, in his classes, I found him quite aloof. He spoke evenly, in a measured way, but we students hung on his every word. I scarcely dared ask him anything or even speak normally to him and I was not the only one. His field was anthropology, the direction of praxeology, indebted to or inspired by Lévi-Strauss, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, to mention just the most famous names.

His theory was highbrow, extremely specialised; his explanation of it was overpoweringly erudite. He used words that were unknown to me such as *umbilical cord, orifice, menarche, weaning.* He mixed these bodily words with a ingenious Freudian-coloured science. Nothing was what it seemed, everything had a meaning or acquired it in his world. I was carried away by his mysterious texts, which I devoured. His anthropological jargon, his stories about rituals and myths, the images of alien cultures fascinated me. His analyses were profound, mercurial, impenetrable. I was scarcely able to explain his theory to other people.

But he told us about the great, brave anthropologists who went and lived in another place, in another language area, to be able to approach their own mysteries via a detour.

Isn't that what we all want to do?

4

I was twelve. Uncle Marcel said: 'We'll try it, in our own good time. With malice.'

'What's malice, uncle?'

Uncle Marcel didn't have an immediate answer. It was about calm, patience, shrewdness. My uncle had always had that expectant, probing attitude, while his brother Omer, my father that is, would have long since sworn and kicked with his clogs.

Canniness, trickiness, slyness: that was malice. It was using the right tools in the right way, using one's power's in the most profitable way.

'Try taking the bend like this,' said Uncle Marcel, when he taught me to plough. 'Look back, what do you see?'

'A line,' I said at the big steering wheel of the tractor.

'Is the line straight?' asked Marcel in a slightly compelling tone.

'It could be straighter,' I replied.

'You mustn't declutch so quickly. I'll show you.'

I looked at Marcel's wiry upper arms. He was taller in stature than my father, but my father was stronger, more ruthless and impetuous. More carefree too.

While Marcel continued the precise ploughing, I sat fiddling with a loose tooth. Suddenly I had the tooth and showed it proudly to Uncle Marcel.

Marcel stopped the tractor. He got out solemnly with me and made the sign of the cross with the tooth in his hand. He threw the tooth behind him and proclaimed: 'Dear Lord, give me a bone. You shall have a stone.'

'Pay attention,' said Uncle Marcel. 'What do you feel?'

Immediately I felt a new tooth starting to grow in my mouth.

'You see,' said Marcel.

On summer evenings, he and I rode to Lampernisse, a nearby village. We had lush meadows there with one-year-old bulls and young heifers. The animals stayed there from April until November. The tractor floated over the long, raised road between the creeks. We stopped at a ditch full of rustling reeds, and sat down by the side of the road.

'Still now, young man,' ordered Marcel.

'I'm sitting still, uncle.'

'No, you're wobbling,' said Marcel.

We looked straight ahead. A yellow gorse swayed on a barley stalk.

'Hear,' said my uncle.

'What am I supposed to hear?'

'The noise of the wind, lad. Look at the fringes of reeds, the reed mace, the campions. In the summer the wind here gives a lovely warmth to your ears, don't you think? Sometimes the wind cries. Sometimes too it slaps like a flag against our head.'

'A slap round the ears?'

'More a soft cloth. That's the spirit, lad.'

'The spirit?'

'Hear how the spirit makes the wind flap,' said Marcel.

'It sounds like a tom-tom.'

'Yes, like in Africa.'

We were silent. A swarm of plovers drew a slight, sharp shadow over our heads.

'See how the trees are lop-sided because of the west wind, said marcel. 'One day those trees will collapse.

'No,' I laughed.'

'Not for a long time yet, lad,' smiled Marcel. At that moment he said: 'I'm a lop-sided tree myself.'

Because of polio at the age of four Marcel's left leg had never developed properly. That leg was shorter and had a twisted curled-up foot, which made him limp and meant he was never completely steady on his feet. He wore one special shoe, with his club foot in it, invisibly wrapped in bandages. For his handicap, he received a pittance of a disability benefit. Uncle Marcel said about his foot: 'I don't say anything about it and not even that.'

At home, when I referred innocently to it, my father immediately upbraided me: 'You mustn't laugh at my brother's disability.'

'I'm not laughing at it,' I said.

'You mustn't even speak about it. My brother doesn't like it.'

'That was true enough, Marcel couldn't stand it. Anyway, although he had a limp, Marcel always walked ahead, as he knew the shortest way. He did things with malice, he would growl, for no one was as handy as he was. On the farm he did all the bricklaying work, the electricity, the meadow gates. His work was accurate, his eye extremely precise. In September Marcel took his hunting rife with him on the tractor to shoot at hares and partridges. But on the farm he kept well away from cows and pigs, because they could push him off balance. He could not save himself with a well-aimed kick.

Marcel was not married. He lived in the village down the road, in a cottage on the Kallebeke, among dahlias, fruit bushes and a grapevine conservatory. He kept bees and grew tobacco. Marcel worked six days a week for my father. On Saturday evening mother worked out his hours on a slip of paper. She went over to the red marble chimney piece on which the bills and invoices were collected. She paid him from the proceeds of butter and eggs.

Marcel received the money in silence. He shifted the copper pot on the chimney piece a little to the right, them to the left again. He folded the notes slowly, and put them in his trouser pocket.

'I can feel something's not right,' mother insisted.

Marcel shrugged his shoulders. 'It's not easy working for a brother.'

When he went outside, Bertha followed him.

'You mustn't ask me to explain,' said Marcel. 'And you mustn't follow me.'