

# Memoirs of a Leopard

**Peter Verhelst**

**An extract pp 6-14; 43-48**

**Original title** Memoires van een luipaard  
**Publisher** Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 2001

**Translation** Dutch into English  
**Translator** Sherry Marx

© Peter Verhelst/Sherry Marx/Prometheus/Bert Bakker/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 6-14**

It's ONE of those nights when the air is as soft as the belly of a cat. You lean forward and touch those words with the tips of your fingers. Left to right. Slowly you stroke that sentence until the fur begins to crackle.

The shutters have been closed for days already, first to keep out the warmth, then because every effort takes too much energy. It's so hot you can smell the cedarwood even in bed, where you're lying listening to the panting voice of a woman, her moaning and breathing seeping through the walls, as a hand moves lazily from left to right.

The sun pounded on the house all day long. The air shimmered like a cloud of mosquitoes. Perhaps you didn't get out of bed. You breathed in and out. The heat has nestled in the walls, emanated through the plaster. You wake up at intervals, gleaming as if someone has oiled you with dreams as you slept. You rinsed that glow off but it didn't help a bit.

The same way it doesn't help a bit when you spray the garden wall until it's drenched – the bricks just keep smoldering. The parched grass pricks your feet like metal slivers. Night finally descends. The cropped hedges lose their form. The first dark pools loom up in the contours of the garden. That's what you were waiting for. You remove your last pieces of clothing as black ink permeates all.

In the recesses of the garden you see the tree waving like a body. Just as slowly.

You can close your eyes.

As you draw your head into your shoulders you start to sense it. Something you try to bring closer with that waving hand. Something you initiated with that movement and that starts to come alive between you and that other body. Like the scent spiraling up out of a flower. But there are no flowers anymore. You tilt the head so that that breath can brush your neck. Your cheek. Until it presses against your lips and teeth so that you have to open the mouth, and it starts to swell up inside there. The waving stops. You put a hand on the head. The biting can finally start.

You'll prepare yourself for the night. But you already know you'll come home, stand in front of the mirror, and not recognize your own face.

A CITY HAS many temptations, especially for people who have no one waiting for them at night. I was a newcomer to the city. My eyes couldn't take it all in. The kind of fever you feel when you're on the trail of something you've always been waiting for.

During the day I did the things that were expected of me. After the museum closed I went to the station. I loved riding the current. Chance touches, scents, voices, soft flesh bumping against my elbow. Food and drink to me.

The bouncing Adam's apple of a man as he emptied his beer glass.

The splayed fingers of a woman placed on her blouse as she bent over to pick up her bag.

A girl, smiling, lost in thought, rode against the current, colliding with no one. Until she stopped, right in front of me, furled her eyebrows and, without noticing me, spun round on her heels and let herself be carried away again. Humming, she brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. I saw her every night.

Rush hour was over by about eight. A kind of lethargy prevailed that overwhelmed me as well. The men leaning against the wall had knives in their pockets, I think. Why else would they cautiously stroke the fabric of their coat as I passed?

The station had two exits. Whoever took the first went home. Whoever took the second wasn't expected by anyone. Men on the street, women behind windows. Chance drove me to the second exit. I looked at my hands. They were bathed in colors I'd never seen before during the daytime. I pulled my hood up and sank my hands into my pockets.

The girls stood in an aquarium, draped their hair over their shoulders, smiled at their reflections. Started singing, each in her own fashion.

Some almost touched the glass so that it steamed up and became impossible to see their mouths. Only those eyes. They said enough.

Some wrote a name backward with their tongue on the steamed-up glass.

Some wiggled their hips slowly like cigarette smoke.

Some brushed their hair slowly until it crackled.

One of them smiled at me. She was wearing more clothes than all the others put together.

I had enough money with me.

She climbed the stairs ahead of me, and I saw the hoof-shaped muscles in her calves.

In the room she pushed me down into a chair.

"Are you sure?"

I nodded.

She went and sat on the bed, and looked at me.

"Look to the side," I said, trying not to make it sound like an order.

She put her hands on her legs and looked to the side, calmly. I saw the muscles in her neck. The shell of the ear shaped like a half-heart. She looked at me again. I pushed off my hood and shook my hair loose.

"I'm ..."

"I heard it in your voice," she said. She lifted her hands, undid her blouse, and slipped it off. Then she stood up.

I shook my head.

"Oh yes." She stepped out of her skirt and came and stood with her back toward me. Twisted her arms behind her. Undid the clasp. Then hooked a finger around a strip of her panties and slid them down.

"Stay in that position." Sharp, like an order.

She didn't.

I let the cold water run over me until my skin became totally numb. And even then I couldn't completely wash her off me.

The next day I stood rocking – twenty storeys high – in front of my window, and drew a woman's face on my belly with my index finger.

DAYTIME IS the foreplay. You lie in the grass and thoughts zoom around your head. That you're coming out of the station now, for example. You convince yourself that you love wandering aimlessly around the streets, but you know you're being dragged along. Sometimes your eyes get hooked on a kneecap, or caught on the jagged crag of a shoulder, or linger on a collarbone like a hand. You see how she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and how, with that same gesture, she pens an elegant letter inside your scalp. There are so many possibilities. But it's undeniably the eyes that do it. Taunting. Enticing. All those temptations that pull you along through the city.

The pattern of the procession reminds you of the endless capricious curl painted on the walls of mosques.

The air shimmers above the branches. You lay two petals on your eyes so that you can look at the sun. Later you stand in front of the mirror and see that the eyelids are white.

Occasionally you go and stand against the cool bathroom tiles. The smoke of a cigarette spirals through your hips. You know you're ready. You have eyes that can see into the night.

Everywhere in the house the curtains billow up when you open the front door.

Outside, the air moves like a lazy mouth.

Gleaming slivers of sweat on your upper lip, your forehead, your neck. On your collarbone. On the palms of your hands that you're holding up below – as if there's something to hold your hands up to. But no matter how fast you wipe away those slivers, before you're finished they'll pop out again through the pores.

The streets are quiet. As you pass, the dogs lie motionless, panting, under the trees. In the gardens, candles puff smoke to keep away the insects. You see fans moving back and forth like wings in slow motion. You walk from one pool of light to the next.

In the park the trees sigh.

The lake ripples. They say the heat has sucked the oxygen out of the water. Is that why the fish swim on the surface nipping at the swarm of insects? Shiny, like eels in the mud. For hours, minutes, nights in succession you stand at the lakeside listening to the fish.

From time to time you see faint shadows among the trees. Muted voices, after which business can begin.

The moon is a veined, alabaster lantern. You stretch out an arm and watch a mosquito suck itself full.

When you walk back to the street, you see phosphorescent eyes among the tree trunks.

I'VE ALWAYS been able to draw. As a child, I walked through the house armed with pencils and paper, drawing everything I saw. Chairs. The table. A knife and fork. *Things*. At least that's what my parents thought. They didn't realize, for example, that for me drawing a fork was evoking the hand that held it. My parents worried, and said I should mix more with people. I went outside. The other

children preferred to look at themselves. I loved to look at them. At first they stood around me jeering, as I drew a portrait of whoever was sitting in front of me. After a while they got used to me – or they pretended to. It's funny: pull out a camera and everyone does their best to act as natural as possible. It's precisely that unnaturalness that betrays how someone wants to be seen. The same applied to the children. While I was busy, I noticed that some assumed poses that could only be meant for a sketchbook. I obeyed, and stole their bodies. Every drawing I made I gave away because it wasn't the result I was after. It was the stealing itself that excited me, not the booty.

I have a museum full of body parts. In my head.

The drawings were very successful. People were surprised by the striking likeness between subject and depiction. I didn't know what they were talking about. Because my marks at school were good and my parents couldn't object to my mixing with people, they let me go to the Art Academy. Every Thursday the neighbor woman came and picked me up, and together we drove to the Academy in town. I sat with my nose and fingertips glued to the front window. The neighbor woman said nothing, but I noticed she watched me the whole time out of the corner of her eye.

At the Academy they thought I was a rough diamond. A deft hand was all that was needed to make me sparkle. They taught me techniques, little tricks, ways of seeing, of dividing space ... Nonsense. I couldn't concentrate on the model lying on the sofa because it interfered with my imagination. Throughout the lesson I drew the faces of the people I'd seen on the street.

After a while they left me to my own devices. I loved the silence of the drawing class. Only the breathing of the model and the scratching of the charcoal on the paper.

It was late in the evening when we drove home again. We avoided the rush. Women who emerged from the shadows opened their coats and smiled. Pale, waving trees.

On one of those drives the woman told me she loved standing in the garden after sundown, watching the clouds drift by.

"As if you're standing at the foot of an apartment building and looking up, and the racing clouds pull your body along with the wind. You know? That kind of dizziness."

One day she'd stood in the garden, her head drawn into her shoulders. There were no clouds. Only the moonlight. She'd looked around, surprised. She'd never noticed the tree she was standing under before. The trunk gleaming like polished leather in the silvery light, its finely pointed, serrated leaves. As the woman studied the tree, she could taste the swelling air. One glance was all it took for the tree to have a scent. Her head drawn into her shoulders, the woman felt thousands of tiny, scented drops rain onto her body.

"Do you feel that dizziness?" she asked.

I inhaled deeply. Smiled. Nodded. It took a while before I realized something wasn't right.

We drove along the canal. It was all right until then. But the trees swooshed by us left and right. We were driving much too fast. I looked to the side and saw that her eyes were closed. Quickly, in that one moment when fear and amazement became one, I shook her arm. Nothing. Eyes shut. I grabbed the steering wheel, tried to keep the car away from the trees.

Then the car slowed down.

Came to a halt on the shoulder.

I heard the laugh bubbling up from deep down.

"That kind of dizziness, I mean," she said.

I was incensed. Angry at myself for letting myself be so taken in. Angry at her because she'd betrayed the tacit understanding between us. Confused because I'd had to lean over her to take control of the steering wheel. And, especially, confused because the fear had excited me.

We didn't say a word after that. Not even when we stopped in front of my house. She smiled when the upstairs curtain opened and my mother's face appeared. I got out. I heard my name as I put my key in the lock. She leaned over toward the window.

"Your drawings," she said.

As I took the drawings I touched her fingers for a second.

---

**p 43-48**

IN THE SAME way as a man dreams of a son who will later be able to carry him during those depleted, final days, I dreamed of her during my ascent to the light. Someone who would put one arm under my knees and the other around my back. My Madonna of the Muscle. Every morning she carried me to the living room and left me to bob about on an azure-blue sea.

Sometimes she pinched me in the arm to convince me I was awake. Sometimes I fell asleep in the middle of a sentence. Sometimes I pretended to. I loved watching her through my eyelashes as she did the most ordinary things. How she cleared off the table, for example, or from time to time tucked a defiant lock of hair behind her ear. It's not always the biggest gestures that have the biggest effect.

She read the newspaper, holding the paper between a rubbing thumb and index finger. Occasionally she furrowed her brows as she scanned the headlines. Occasionally her glance would wander off into the garden. I loved her profile. She turned her head toward me.

"Are you awake?"

I didn't answer.

She knelt beside me and blushed. I had sketched a perfect copy of her profile on my thigh with my index finger.

She looked at me and tucked the lock of hair behind her ear.

"What are you doing now?" I asked.

She started to kiss her own face.

In the same way as I had drawn her on my thigh, she drew me on her skin: she moved my head carefully up and down until my face was on her belly. A gleaming tongue-painting.

Afterward, as we were basking in the sun, she said: "You're cured."

She was wrong.

"Do you hear that?" she asked.

A butterfly fluttered against the inside of the window. Carefully she plucked the creature off the pane and threw it outside, where, startled, it disappeared in a flurry of Arabic letters.

Her profile.

Her back, now that she'd laid her right arm over her head to protect her eyes from the sun.

She stretched and asked: "What are we going to do?"

It was as if the sunlight had crystallized under her skin.

The patch of grass lay sweating in the park. We stood next to the lake and shot breadcrumbs into the water.

The lake was a gift from a mad king to his subjects. He dreamed of an empire where the sun would never set, and thus ordered an ocean built on the outskirts of his beloved city. But to build an ocean, you need people without a fear of depths. The king imported Egyptian men because they had pyramids in their blood and because the color of their skin scarcely differed from the color of peat. Besides, what's an ocean except an inverted, endless pyramid? The Egyptians arrived under the approving glances of the king, who had donned a toga for the occasion and was flanked by his lover, who wore snakes around her neck. The king had always had a passion for history.

On the king's orders the Egyptians undressed and set to work. After a while there was no difference between the soil and the backs of the diggers. The hole grew deeper, but where a hole appears so does a mountain. The king ordered each subject to come and fetch his weight in peat every day. Once a week he ordered cows and chickens thrown into the hole to still the hunger of the workers.

Every day the subjects came to fetch their portion of peat. Lugged it back to their dwellings. Burned it. Filled their stoves with it until the streets were draped in a yellow fog. The king banned the burning of peat. So the subjects started to build again. Every square meter of the city was filled with rooms. When even the streets were filled, they started building upward. Before long the city resembled a festering wasp's nest.

One day the workers had dug so deep their voices were no longer audible. On that day the king ordered the hole filled with water. The nearest canals were directed toward the hole. It was the king who single-handedly made the first hole. The dam broke. The water started flowing. And the king struck up a nostalgic song. An ode to the Red Sea.

Mirrors were placed alongside the lake to suggest an infinite ocean. During the day the subjects were busy catching the sun, releasing it again at nightfall, when the king crossed the ocean by boat conquering one island after the other. Until finally he found the island he was destined for.

She looked at me.

"Did he find the island?"

"One day he arrived in Atlantis and disappeared. Later some men claimed they saw him flying through the air singing *all those who want to be pirates* at the top of his lungs. But no one has ever been able to confirm that story."

"You're mad."

When I was at the lake a while later, she came and stood behind me with her arms around me. And the banks really did part. Until there was nothing else to be seen but the endless reflection of the water.

I LAY UNDER the tree listening to the buzzing of the insects.

Her voice: "It's sweltering."

Eyes shut, I undid my clothes. The warm mouth of the sun.

"Open your eyes."

I moaned.

Through my eyelashes, I saw the canopy.

"Look," she whispered, as her teeth etched a copy of what the sun's brush was painting on me. A moving leopard skin.

She lay on my hand.

Her face above mine. Serious. Absorbed in thought.

A shiny white stripe between her eyelids.

The taut, woven rope in her back.

Everywhere, I saw her heart beating.

Red flowers in her neck.

Later we lay next to each other under the sighing foliage like languid cats in the shade.

FIRST YOU STRETCH your fingers.

Then you bring your fingertips together in the form of a beak.

Let that beak pick up the plum.

Move the different fingers independently of each other.

Let the plum rotate through your fingers like that.

Keep making pinching movements so that the flesh separates from the skin and the stone.

Then you bring the plum to your nose.

Breathe in.

Bite with your lips first.

Bite off a small piece of skin afterward.

Push the plum against your lips.

Suck as you press the plum against your lips.

Pluck the stone out of the skin with your teeth, squeeze it between your tongue and palate to steal the remaining fruit.

Keep the stone under your tongue.

Suck, holding the half-empty skin against your half-opened lips.

Incredulous, she lay there looking at me. She slapped her hand on the sheet. The plums rolled in all directions. When she saw my face, she couldn't control herself.

I sighed.

A new fit of laughter.

I sat up on the edge of the bed, holding the plum to my mouth, and watched her.

When she'd gathered enough air, she asked: "So that's how you ... learned ... to ki ..."

I removed the plum and spit out the stone. "To kiss, you mean?"

She nodded, doubling over.

A short time later she rubbed up against me like a cat. "Are you angry? Are you really angry?"

I looked away.

But out of the corner of my eye I could see how she let the plums roll one by one down her raised knees onto her belly. Afterward she put one hand behind her head and held the plum up to her mouth with the other. Pinched. Bit. Sucked. A drop on her chin. She kept looking at me. Let the first knee fall to the side.

"Go ahead!" she said. Her voice sounded lower than normal.