

Hinterland

Elvis Peeters

An extract pp (9-16; 100-103)

Original title De ommelanden
Publisher Podium, 2019

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Anna Asbury

© Elvis Peeters/Anna Asbury/Podium, 2019/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 9-16

Hinterland

Shit, the bitch won't start.

Again. And Again. Nothing, not so much as a click, I'm sitting in a bloody dead vehicle.
Fuck.

Damn it. Check the manual. Oil level's as it should be. Plenty of petrol in the tank. The engine's not overheated.

What now?

Wait?

Brave the heat. How did it get so hot already? And how long will I be out in it?

Someone's sure to come along. Why else would there be a road here? A miserable, dusty road. Through a vast open landscape – true enough – but dry, desiccated, thorny.

No signal on my phone, of course. If such spots even exist anymore. The economy has ground to a halt in this godforsaken hole. Correction: the economy has emigrated, this region has been intentionally abandoned, no doctor, no amenities, everything has to be solved with love, patience and incomprehension. Here and there a meagre orchard, a few thirsty plants, ailing crops, an unemployed team among the stones, either the farmer or the draught animal dead, one less mouth to feed in any case. The region is becoming depopulated. Working the land with a donkey and a hoe, planting a couple of olive stones in the ground, shifting the shade, who can keep that up? No houses in the surrounding area. Who would the young people dance with here?

I hope someone comes along soon, because in this heat you won't keep anyone out of the ground for long. A man, fifty-two according to the data, I don't know anything about the cause of death, they don't tell me that. The death toll is high. Anyone who stays is waiting.

For me it's a goldmine, like Lampedusa used to be. For days nothing happens, right up to the moment when I spring into action. Sometimes it still goes wrong. But a banknote soon gets things moving.

I try to keep as low a profile as possible, I don't want to come across as a vulture. I spend the majority of the time at Stone Farm, a remote farm, with an elderly widow, where I arrived the day her husband died. The misery had begun a couple of weeks earlier, she told me: when the man spoke, his lungs whistled. He spoke less and less, but the whistling continued. At night it was a monotone, a far cry from a nightingale's song. That morning the whistling had stopped, the man was dead. I turned up as she was washing the sheets. She'd wrapped her husband in an old blanket,

she said she'd loved him, especially in the last few years, that once the children had left home she hadn't known what else to do.

I asked if I could take his photo.

She nodded and unwrapped the blanket.

I'll do it alone, I said. She nodded again. Shortly afterwards I heard her squeezing milk from the goat, a thin animal in a neighbouring stall, kept alive on a few thistles.

The man was buried the same day. I kept out of the way.

Then the widow offered me accommodation. A week later I gave her the photo. She hung it in a dark corner, away from the window. I took a room in the attic, where the children had once slept. She'd informed the children, she told me, perhaps through the priest, but neither had been in touch. Not later on either. What was there for them in this region?

In these villages and hamlets there are loads of skeletons walking around with just enough flesh to pump blood through. No one'll spare a cent for that, so they willingly allow me to take their photo in return for cash. They think it's for a scientific project. I refrain from disillusioning them.

*

Perhaps they see through her after all, this woman with her camera who turns up where people are dying. Despite her circumspection and precautions and her confident manner, there are minor slips, inattentions that give her away. She doesn't see it herself because she's looking through the lens, straightening a worn-out shirt, pulling the panel of a jacket closed.

The silent inhabitants, bent with their grief for the dead, or the burden of avoiding joining them, notice, point it out to one another, silently, and hastily put away the money she gives them.

How can she think she's invisible? She's no angel.

Now she's sitting alone in her dead car. Both doors are wide open, like short, clumsy wings. She rummages in her photo bag, takes her camera out. Far in the distance she can see movement on the stony surface. It's unclear whether it's towards her or away. Her camera lens will bring whatever's happening closer.

She looks, zooms in and sees what appears to be a small procession, six men carrying a coffin and a few people trudging along behind. A funeral procession crawling through the dust like a caterpillar, that's what she thinks she can see. It's too far away.

She explores the surface further in the hope of discerning a graveyard, a farm or a hamlet. That procession must come from somewhere, it must be going somewhere. But she can't find a single useful landmark. The lens can't zoom in endlessly. The scene and its surroundings are too far off to bring into closer detail. In any case the procession is not coming towards her.

Shame.

She scans the horizon.

A missed opportunity, she thinks.

*

No one on their way to help me. Shall I throw up dust, swirl it up to attract their attention? But they're all sure to be looking at the ground, in case there's something unexpected there, something to eat or a lost coin or an item that might come in handy. Their concerns are not far from them. Their thoughts no longer reach out to the capital and the politicians who govern the country. Their region belongs to the territory, but no longer to the state. There are barely any taxes to collect here and welfare is no longer provided. These people have toughened, they can take care of themselves.

How long will I be hanging around? Sooner or later someone has to come this way. Soon there'll be no point in driving on. They won't wait for me to bury him.

*

She acts tough, and in some respects she is, but really you could break the woman's neck with a simple grasp. When we put together all the stories about her, we can more or less guess what she's after with her camera. But what she does it all for, it's beyond our comprehension. She's one of the few figures in the region not approaching fifty or far beyond. We have to be thrifty with her. Before you know it, she'll be gone again.

Now she's completely still, sitting there slowly growing impatient. At first we thought she was mesmerised by the procession. Another death, it doesn't stop. The second in the village this week. No need to panic though. We can supply deaths for years to come.

We don't give ourselves just like that. We know we have to rely on ourselves. Every rib, every foot is counted here. Every day there's work to do. We have to put bread on the table. That's the way we were born, we have to eat and breathe. We've no use for any god. From time to time we're informed of the birth of a grandchild. In a city where our relatives can scrape together just enough to help the mother suckle and the child get milk. Often over the border, in a country we never even dreamt of before, when we still had the chance to move there.

In contrast to our children, we've learnt that all in all you need very little to live.

That's no life, they say.

What is it, then, that we're doing?

Once everything was at your fingertips here, they say, you've allowed the wealth to go to ruin.

What can we say in reply? We put them in the world. Every three or four years we voted, more frequently later on, as the governments dropped like flies towards the end. No one goes on about elections anymore, everything's quiet now. Only the priest still has tales to tell. And here and there someone has a violin or an accordion. We don't need to find reasons to celebrate. As long as we're breathing, we want to eat. That's our celebration, the fact that we're alive. Even if we're hanging by a thread. Misfortune is timeless, we go on.

And now she's sitting there, in her car, alone. We're curious as to what she'll do. She's already opened the bonnet, she's checked the oil level, she's looked at the coolant with the screw cap in her hand and an eye to the opening, she's taken the cap off the petrol tank and shoved the car with her full weight to get it shaking and listened with her ear to the tank to hear the petrol splashing, as she's not sure she can trust the fuel gauge. Everything seems to be in order and yet the bitch won't start. For now there's no despair in her face, just impatience that will slowly turn to irritation.

We recognise every shade of emotion in a face, through impatience, irritation, rage, despair. Even when that face is as young as hers, we see through that, those emotional states are ageless.

When she arrived here, she wore jeans, tight-fitting around her buttocks. In those trousers she emanated decisiveness, power, self-assurance, daring. But she'd underestimated the heat, the thousand-fold repetition of that heat every day, without a whisper of wind and the dust that spontaneously billows up. Now she wears a skirt which doesn't immediately stick to her thighs or reveal awkward sweat marks. That's also why she wears a shirt that leaves her arms and armpits free.

For some she's a windfall. Just looking at her is a pleasure. We might be bedraggled and emaciated, our knees might have given in, and our backs and shoulders and eyes; the last thing to abandon us is desire.

She doesn't seem to take much notice of us. She turns up where there's death. She's within her rights to do that. But in exchange we warm ourselves on her life. That doesn't seem to have occurred to her, afflicted as she is with her own cares. She takes photos. She wants to record things. She has that in common with the death she's so keen on. Death takes a life as it is, doesn't change it one iota, not for a second, no thought, no gesture. Death definitively completes it. Full stop. For

eternity. No, eternity isn't granted to most of us. After death the memories might continue to convulse a while in the heads of family, neighbours, friends, then that's it.

Done.

She's stopped staring into the distance. She's put the camera down on the passenger seat and now she's sitting at the wheel, both doors still wide open. It must be warm under her skirt and in her armpits, she opens and closes her legs a couple of times like bellows, flaps her arms up and down, like a chicken with clipped wings. She's becoming agitated. We already suspected that. She fiddles with her phone, resting it on the steering wheel.

All for nothing, she thinks.

p 100-103

City

It was reckless, if not madness, for your sister to enter the outer regions without an escort. And the fact that you can't make contact with her is entirely to be expected if you're not working on a military frequency; there are a great many blind spots there in civilian communications. After all, it's not profitable and we don't consider it our responsibility to provide: on the contrary, it's better not to advance communication within the hinterland. They'll be fine. If you like, I can have someone inquire whether our intelligence services have recently received signs or messages from a registered citizen from the outer regions. Given that it's a private matter, it'll cost you, and there's no guarantee of an outcome. What do you think?

Yes, what do I think? That she speaks like I imagine a typical official would speak, when I'd hoped she would level with me like an intelligent person. After all, it's about my sister, and my mother, who's worried. I'm just asking what's possible in a case like this. I don't need to hear all that legal nonsense and security jargon.

Leave it for now, I reply, I'll give it a little longer. A few days ago she let us know she was about to come home. We haven't heard anything since. Perhaps something just came up.

Now I know the score. I'll leave the office, cross the street, to the sunny side, find a pavement café, have a coffee – I normally drink tea, but today I don't feel like it, as if it would taste bad – and think about how I can reassure mum. We don't have to pay through the nose right away. Perhaps the bank can tell me where and when Dora made her last payment or took cash out. Although I've no idea what you can do with money in the hinterland. Do they even still use it there?

I order a ristretto. The aroma of the powerful little cup on the sun-drenched terrace does me good. I've granted myself a day off, I'm tired but not listless, feel like buying flowers, lively colours to put in a vase.

No news at the media company Dora occasionally reports for. She wasn't on a job, no one's worried. Only mum. I can already hear her say, Marie, you don't have children, you can't know that a mother would rather receive news about her daughter today than tomorrow, even if no news were good news.

In the end Dora is old and wise enough, right?

The coffee is lovely. The terrace is getting busier. Clearly I'm not the only one taking a day off. On the other side of the street workmen are assembling an artistic light installation and one of the many stages is under construction on the corner of the square beyond. Everything is being prepared for the Paradise City Festival. Dora won't want to miss that. The opportunity it'll give her

to take unusual photos, people in all states of ecstasy, drunkenness, joy, disillusionment. It starts again in a couple of days. We can wait that long, mum will understand.

*

In the evening, when the hues soften, the white light abates and the reflection in the countless windows is less dazzling, Marie enters the roof garden of the tower block where she lives with her husband. Stern is in Boston for a few weeks, where he advises the Water Company on redesigning its infrastructure. The roof garden of their previous apartment block had no allotments available when she felt the need to garden, and the tower block where she is now is four floors taller. She can look further over the city, as far as the sprawling ends of the slums that are continually built on the edge, regardless of government attempts to prevent it. In the past the city drones had once sprinkled chemicals on the shacks and people were advised to keep doors and windows closed while they were burnt down with flamethrowers, so she heard from her office manager whose brother was on the city council. The thick, filthy smoke that hung over the city may have been blown away with wind cannons, but that didn't stop the stink of burning and smouldering material hanging over the neighbourhood for weeks on end. The media didn't report much on it and it was unclear whether anyone had died, or if so how many. You could question the approach, and the Centre Party protested and tabled a motion of censure – which was overruled – but no one offered an alternative to limit the nuisance. The slums form a breeding ground for diseases, bacteria and vermin. The regulations are clear: living within a radius of five kilometres outside the city is prohibited, except for registered citizens with a work permit or a mandate, and that is posted on large boards in different languages. There are probably many people who can't or won't read, in any case they always return in large numbers. Now there are already thousands again. Oh well, in the end they cause little direct inconvenience.

She bends down to the green beans she's grown and reaches for the tomatoes, a few of which are already deep, ripe red. Tomorrow she'll take a couple to her mother. There'll be more in a week. When Dora turns up she can take a punnet too.