Bold Ventures

Charlotte Van den Broeck

An extract pp (11-31; 237-262)

Original title Waagstukken
Publisher De Arbeiderspers, 2019

Translation Dutch into English
Translator Laura Watkinson

p 11-31

I – Municipal Swimming Centre, Town Park, Turnhout (2005–2011)
Architect: anonymous

Fortunately she lands on her back when it happens, so she can keep her mouth above water. Two weeks before her sixteenth birthday, Nathalie C., from the municipality of Retie, gets her long ponytail caught in the extraction system of the toddlers' pool. The incident occurs on a busy Sunday afternoon, when it is too crowded to swim lengths in the sports pool. Nathalie's uncle drove them to Turnhout from a neighbouring town. While waiting for a 25-metre lane to become free, she plays with her uncle and her young nephew in the shallow paddling pool. She is sitting with her back to the edge of the pool when something yanks her down. Her head slams against the tiled surround. At first, Nathalie tries to scramble to her feet, but a tugging pain keeps her down. She grabs for her ponytail – instinctively we cover painful places with our hands – but where her hair should be she feels only her scalp, and the crown of her head is right up against the wall of the pool.

Although there is no immediate danger of drowning between the moment the ponytail gets sucked into the purification filter and the moment she is freed, for those minutes of uncertainty, Nathalie is in an extremely uncomfortable position.

Bert P., the manager of the swimming centre, is the first to rush to her assistance. The obvious solution is to cut off her ponytail, but Nathalie resists with her entire body, and so the entangled ponytail pulls even harder at her scalp. Any moment now, her skin and hair could tear away from her skull. The way she is thrashing about also makes it very difficult for Bert P. to position the scissors to make the liberating cut. The girl is crying blue murder, and it is not clear whether her screams are out of intense pain or protest.

As the manager, Bert P. is used to acting decisively in crisis situations. Without attempting to interpret the screams, he ruthlessly decides to chop off the ponytail. Her uncle and some concerned bystanders take care of Nathalie. A towel is wrapped around the back of her head. Scissors in one hand and cut-off ponytail in the other, Bert P. sees what must have happened: in the exact spot where Nathalie's head was up against the edge of the pool, the chlorine-detection system has an intake point, shielded by a 4mm-thick plate. It turns out that the plate has not been screwed in properly, which has allowed Nathalie's ponytail to end up behind it, in the suction circuit.

Having reached this conclusion, Bert P. leaps back into action. He completely drains the toddlers' pool. Then he reattaches the plate. This time he makes sure that the screws are as tight as can be. Problem solved.

Nathalie is not left with any serious injuries, but she doesn't feel at all right after the incident. "It doesn't really hurt, but it was such a shock," she says in an interview with the regional TV station.

At her birthday party, I see that she has placed a big fake flower over the bald spot on the back of her head. It looks a complete mess, but we only say that behind her back.

Since the opening in October 2005, the swimming centre in the town park has never been open for more than three consecutive months. All sorts of peculiar defects have kept resulting in temporary closures: from system failures and subsidence to Biblical scenes with the water suddenly transforming into milk.

The hugely expensive, poorly functioning new swimming centre soon became a local scandal. It had cost ten million euros and it was never open. The regular swimmers in particular were left with questions, the most important one being if they would receive a refund of their annual membership fee.

At the time, the whole commotion and the questionable local-authority politics involving the swimming centre largely passed me by. When, barely four years later, in 2009, it became painfully clear that the swimming baths were going to close permanently, due to persistent electricity outages and water leaks, I was already studying in Ghent and had other things on my mind, such as world literature and the process of becoming uprooted. I went swimming once a week in the beautiful Art Deco pool on Baudelokaai. The boggy soil of the region where I was born and everything that sucked me in slowly released its hold on me, just as Turnhout's swimming centre was sinking into it. Literally.

The machinery room, where the centre's boiler and other equipment were installed, was located in the basement. Almost imperceptibly but surely, this space was sinking into the swampy ground. The safety sensors for the electrical system, attached three quarters of the way up the basement walls, were ultra-sensitive, but had not been positioned very wisely, taking into account only leaks from above, from the pools themselves, and not the rising groundwater from below. The high position of the sensors would allow most of the room to fill before they were activated. By that time, the machinery would have drowned hopelessly, with electrocuted swimmers bobbing around in the pools above.

Of course, theories and speculation about the closure soon emerged among the users of the swimming centre and other taxpayers, but the town council employed a shrewd media policy to keep a lid on the news about the sinking basement. A vague multitude of varying causes dominated the discussion.

In October 2009, a banner was hung above the entrance to the swimming centre:

PERMANENTLY CLOSED FOR NOW

DUE TO MAINTENANCE

As if, with this stubborn statement, they were planning ahead in an attempt to have the last word.

In the months that followed, they carried out all kinds of investigations designed to improve the electrical system. Plenty of experts were brought in. Even a professor came to visit. Estimates were made and numerous evening meetings were convened. All in the hope of establishing a date for the reopening. A date was decided: in January 2011, the swimming centre would reopen after a closure of eighteen months.

It lasted only a few weeks. In April, the banner was brought out again. The message had been changed:

PERMANENTLY CLOSED ~~FOR NOW~~

DUE TO MAINTENANCE

How many times did I go to the swimming centre myself? Not often enough to justify the significance that I now attach to this *lieu de piscine*. In my defence: often it is only afterwards that you realize what you need to remember and by then it is already too late for the things you would rather have forgotten. And vice versa, in this case. Nevertheless, I still have a very clear memory of my first visit to the new swimming centre. It must have been about six months after the opening, July 2006. I am just fourteen, unchaperoned, out somewhere without my parents for the first time. I am wearing red bikini bottoms in which my swelling hips are beginning to show. The top is a triangular orange piece of polyester, the tip of which is pointing at my bare navel. My hair is falling in a long plait all the way down my back to my bum. On the inside of my wrist is a tribal sticker tattoo from a packet of crisps. I would like a new bikini, preferably high-cut on the hips and with separate compartments for my non-existent breasts, like Eef, who is playing nearby in the water with her neighbour Max – she's a B and is wearing a bikini with cups. Max is ten and chubby, he has a cute face with freckles and a cheeky mouth. When he is bored, he tries to touch us in places that do not actually interest him, but he knows they embarrass us. Eef's breasts are his main target.

It is actually too cold to swim outside, but the indoor pool is closed – something about a technical fault. So Eef and Max are playing in the outdoor pool. I am lying on my towel nearby on the grass. Goosebumps, milky white, scrawny – as dictated by the cruel gaze of a fourteen-year-old girl regarding herself. I also think my stomach is too bulbous. I lean back on my elbows to tighten the imaginary bulge. No one is looking at me in particular, I am practically invisible, and yet the eyes of all the open-air swimmers are burning on my skin. I push up my flat chest, just in case someone would like to take a look anyway.

"Max, don't do that, stop it!" I hear Eef shouting. From the edge of the sunbathing area around the outdoor pool, I can see the lonely weeping willow in the neighbouring field. The corn in the old hay meadow comes up to your knees in July. From where I am lying, the stalks appear to be touching the underside of the drooping willow branches, as if the picture, at the point where they are touching, has been zipped up, losing depth – the painting of a student who is struggling with perspective.

I am reading a contemporary adaption of *Abélard and Héloise*, which is set in New York – in this version of the story, they are called Arthur and Lois. In Latin class, we have just translated the story of Hero and Leander. I think impossible love goes nicely with weeping willows. The combination fans the pilot flame in my inexperienced heart.

I lower myself off my elbows and lie flat on my back, bringing my chin onto my chest so that I can just see the willow sticking up above the corn. From this angle, the stalks appear to be climbing up into the willow. They wrap around the branches like ropes. A noose made of corn is dangling between the leaves from the largest branch.

Forever afternoon. The colours glow. No one has to work. *Peter Getting Out of Nick's Pool* (1966). Californian sun on a man's bare behind. The paintings of David Hockney celebrate the swimming pool in the back yard as a cult place for relaxation, prosperity and sexual freedom.

It is August 2017. I am standing in the temporary exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. Drove to Paris on a whim. In the previous weeks, I have worked manically on a series of commissioned poems. The year before was a busy one, as was the year before that. I can barely remember the time before it was busy. I am a person who is busy. I am probably exhausted, but I do not admit it. Instead, I am angry about nothing all the time. Searching for a salve. Looking at art. I try to recharge myself on Hockney's expanses of pink, blue and yellow. *A Bigger Splash* (1967): simple shapes, the titular splash, a cheerful palette. The sun is outside the canvas, but it must be burning, as that explains the way the colours drip with heat. It seems far away, out of reach, a simple life with swimming pool.

In the painting *Portrait of an Artist – Pool with Two Figures* (1972), a man, who I presume is Hockney himself, stands on the edge of a swimming pool. The back yard looks out over a scenic landscape, green, mountainous, breath. However, the man beside the swimming pool has no time for the view, his gaze is focused downward, at the naked figure gleaming through the water and swimming towards him. The refraction of the light makes marble cracks in the water. The swimmer, turned to stone, lies in the pool of blue. It seems unlikely that he will surface and look up at his observer. Is the man's gaze holding him captive under the water, or do I just want to see everything as a cage?

I walk through the exhibition, through scenes and colours, collages and pencil drawings, Pop Art influences and the reaction against it, through the images of the men in Hockney's life – always those cheeky butts, the recurring swimming pools, the dates. An existence in work. Sixty years in brushstrokes, so too a life passes.

In the last room is Hockney's video installation *The Four Seasons*. Four walls face one another to form a screened-off space. I slip in through the opening between two panels. Inside, each wall consists of nine separate screens, on which one complete moving image is shown. I sit on the bench in front of the winter wall.

Woldgate Woods, Winter, 2010 – The image moves forward along a snowy forest road at the speed of a cautious driver. A predecessor has already left tyre tracks in the carpet of snow. Lining the road are bare trees covered with snow and frost. As I look, the movement draws me into the image, into the landscape, into the whiteness, and I become the looking, I become the driver, and at the same time the slow camera following the road into the forest, and yet I do not seem to travel any distance, because the landscape, as I sink deeper into it, does not change, or at least that is how it seems, as suddenly, before I realize, the snowy road is not only in front of me on the screen, but also behind me, I am on the museum bench and also in the middle of the snow, I move deeper into the white landscape – no, I allow myself to be drawn even deeper into the whiteness by that protracted forward motion, by the hypnotic act of looking. In sync with the slowness of the camera movement, I feel, in the same way as I am being drawn through the landscape, salt

drawing through me as if tears are following the same snowy road through my insides. God, I'm so tired. The white is so pure.

Not long after the permanent closure of the swimming centre in 2011, stories began to circulate in the bars of Turnhout. Friends from the past brought the stories to Ghent with them. Or maybe it happened differently and I heard them when I was back home one time, at the bar in Café Ranonkel. Had I heard about the architect of the swimming centre? In the aftermath of yet another defect, he had apparently committed suicide. Depending on who it was, or their position in the chain of people who told the story, the architect did so by hanging himself in the sinking basement, at the scene of his failure. A pitch-black joke.

Whether this was actually the fate of the hapless architect almost immediately became less important than the plausibility of the story. Someone who brings a public failure of the magnitude of the Turnhout swimming centre down upon his head, who reveals himself to be so incompetent at his profession, trifling with other people and their money, surely has to pay the ultimate price, doesn't he? People believed, or apparently wanted others to believe, that the construction fault had driven the architect to suicide, and this belief was truth enough for the story to be passed on with that version of events. An urban legend in the making, gaining in persuasive force with every retelling. It was true because people believed it was true, just as the story about the murderer in the car boot has proved terrifying around every campfire for generations, because at its core it appeals to a universal fear. Murderers in your boot are scary. Architects who fail commit suicide.

To be honest, it only occurred to me years later that the line of thought leading to the suicide story is a cruel one. I don't believe I questioned the story at first. That was how things worked there sometimes. Later, when I once told the story myself, I seasoned the event with a certain sense of darkly romantic tragedy: the architect as a failed artist, the failure of his creation as the failure of himself.

In the more sentimental versions that did the rounds, the architect was psychologically analysed, not as a tragic artist, but as the misunderstood son of a famous architect from the Turnhout School – you know, *that* one. His father had supposedly sent the prestigious swimming-centre commission his way. A great opportunity, the chance to prove himself within the profession, independently of his name. It was, they said, not only his own failure, but also his failure in the eyes of his father and teacher that had driven him to the depths of despair. We can be harsh to people when we suspect that they have had opportunities simply fall into their laps.

Bar talk. Small-town gossip. A settling of scores. In any case, there was anger about the swimming centre, and anger requires a direction. People were only too happy to point a finger at the architect. After all, he had designed the swimming centre, like that, with the boiler room in that position, in that marshy spot. It might not be possible to undo the mistake, the failure was a done deed, but the person who had made the mistake, at least in this narrative version of reality, should be held to the highest account. Over and over, the suicide in the basement, whether it had happened or not, became true once again with every

telling and every new twist. But whatever the case, no one asked for the story to prove that truth. Therein lies the verdict.

Whenever I descend the ladder of any swimming pool, I have to pass two ghosts from my memory. He and I, forever sixteen. On a Sunday afternoon, we lean entwined against the side of the swimming pool in Turnhout. I am weightless in the water, my legs wrapped around his waist, his hands around my bum and, from that position, his fingers exploring inside my bikini bottoms. Between my legs, I can feel him growing hard in his orange tent of swimming-trunk fabric. Under the water, the friction is not as easy to feel, but he is pressing so hard against me that I am afraid he will leave a bruise. We kiss non-stop, like washing machines, with big swirling movements of the tongue. In between, he says that I'm "sexy", but I can't be certain, because his eyes are shut as he says it. I want him to look at me. I don't dare to look at him myself. I anxiously keep my eyes closed and think about the true-life confession I recently read in a magazine, about a girl who had sex with her boyfriend underwater. His penis became stuck inside her, vacuum sealed. It was really painful. I consider the options, just in case a similar scenario should happen to us. We could run away and join a travelling circus as "The Siamese Lovers". I am infatuated with him, newly on the Pill, and I am on fire. The children we scare, the adults we embarrass – I just don't care. The public baths are an extension of my bedroom, where I have no privacy. My mother makes me leave the door open when I am lying with him on the bed.

It is only when we hear people screaming that our surroundings break through to us and I push him off me. On the other side of the pool, a group of people are standing around the lifeguard, who is lying huddled on the floor. Blood on the anti-slip tiles. Two boys disappearing down the corridor to the changing rooms. Soon the lifeguard is being lifted into an ambulance. Everyone is ordered to leave the swimming pool. As the corridor with the changing cubicles is part of the crime scene, we have to get changed behind the barriers. Almost a hundred swimmers stand dripping in the lobby. The police question all the eyewitnesses.

The lifeguard had apparently pulled a twelve-year-old troublemaker out of the water, so the boy called in his brother – type: pumped-up lout – who proceeded to beat up the lifeguard. Others are claiming that the lifeguard was unable to get the boy under control and grabbed him by the throat to shut him up, so the older brother went to his defence. The security images only show the lifeguard standing with his back to the camera in front of the boy and then being attacked from behind.

After waiting for an hour and a half, we tell the police officer, giggling, that we did not even see what was happening, because we were making out. We are allowed to leave.

The lifeguard is left with a broken cheekbone and a broken foot. The two boys are not identified. The swimming centre remains closed for a number of days.

The architect of the swimming centre has no name. At least, I cannot find his name in the news coverage. Somehow they have managed to keep his identity out of the newspapers. This disappearing trick only fuels the story about his suicide. Here and there, someone claims to know who he is. Knowledge is power, even in bar-room culture. Telling a good secret can earn you a drink, or at least ensure that someone pulls up their stool beside you and provides you with company. According to Rob V., for instance, a regular at Café Ranonkel, the architect is not the son of a famous architect, but the nephew of a councillor who was a member of the opposition of the city council in power at the time. René M. claims that the architect is not even from Turnhout and certainly did not end his life. The contractor, on the other hand, disappeared without a trace after the closure. Stan W., though, is adamant, swearing that it was in fact the contractor who took his own life after unfair accusations.

Meanwhile, the legal proceedings have been going on for almost seven years. The city filed a hefty claim for damages. The parties involved have reached a settlement. No information about the case may be released in any form.

From an ex-councillor, I hear that the contractor had in fact seen the problem coming, but that his advice was not taken into account. The swimming pool had to be finished as quickly as possible, and haste leads to mistakes. He does not wish to waste any more words on the subject and closes the discussion with: “The council sold us a pup.”

The mayor also strictly observes the embargo on clear information about the whole affair. When I ask him about the exact reason for the permanent closure of the swimming pool, he avoids it very deftly, showing a talent for rhetoric: “Due to malfunctions in the technical equipment, as a result of the issues.”

He does not believe much of the story about the architect, but he is not allowed to say anything because of the ongoing proceedings. Instead, the mayor shows me some photographs of the new waterslide.

Danny from Driekuilenstraat, a one-way street parallel to the road where my parents live. Whenever I order a Duvel, I think of him. Every day at around noon, he would go for a coffee at the cafeteria at swimming centre. He travelled the two kilometres to the park in his motorized wheelchair. Social services had given him one for free, because he suffers from obesity and a fatty liver. He maintains this suffering and his right to benefits by drinking twelve to fourteen Duvels a day. My dad thinks it’s a whole crate of 24 Duvels a day, but facts sometimes sound more unbelievable than fiction.

In any case, while drinking he always sits at the cafeteria window, which looks out onto the swimming pool. He watches the swimmers, for no apparent reason. The drink never makes him troublesome or vulgar. He just drinks himself into a stupor. By the end of his visit to the cafeteria, he gives off a sour smell, sometimes mixed with urine. Other than that, he is a polite customer, a reliable source of income for the uninviting cafeteria, where even the toasties are inedible.

At five o’clock, when he drives home in his wheelchair, his wife has a roast chicken ready, which he eats up, skin and all. Then he goes to sleep. He does not get up until twelve the next day, when the same

routine begins again. There is no money left over for his wife to go out. His benefits and her pension cover the bills and the Duvels. She goes out cleaning on the side for any unforeseen expenses. On Sundays, Danny usually stays longer in the cafeteria because of the swimming-club competition. Crawl – he likes to watch that.

On this particular Sunday, the referee stops the competition on the orders of the sports department. Although Danny is not far off his fourteenth Duvel, he still stirs from his stupor to mark this occasion. Through the window, he sees Bert P., the manager of the swimming centre, giving the members of the swimming club hell. What Danny is unable to hear from the cafeteria is that the swimmers have been carelessly depositing their towels and swimming bags around the edge of the pool. As a result, many of the air-supply vents have accidentally been covered (the club has three hundred swimmers). Within half an hour, the obstruction of fresh air by swimming bags and towels has caused the humidity to rise to eighty per cent, making the air in the pool stuffy and difficult to breathe, and so people are becoming light-headed.

The sports department and the referee are chiding the members of the swimming club, but Bert P. is completely laying into them, calling them all sorts of names, as if he is hauling in juvenile delinquents of some kind, instead of merely pointing out an error of judgement to adult hobby swimmers. A few of the members have a go at him. The situation soon becomes heated. In spite of the commotion, they still manage to evacuate the pool within ten minutes.

Bert P. later admits that he reacted too impulsively and wants to think constructively about a solution for the future: maybe he can station someone by the stairs full-time to check that no one is taking swimming bags or towels inside?

After the evacuation, the humidity quickly drops back to fifty per cent, but to be on the safe side they keep the pool closed for the rest of the evening.

When the staff arrive the next day to let in the morning swimmers, they find the motorized wheelchair at the cafeteria entrance long before the usual opening time. Later that day, his wife confirms that Danny did not come home last night. She had waited until the chicken was cold and then thought: Okay, stick it!

There is a great deal of nostalgia on the *Turnhout van Toen* blog, with its pictures and stories about the city as it once was. Under a sepia photograph of the outdoor pools in the town park (three of them, plus a fountain), I read the following reaction:

I still get nostalgic when I remember the open-air swimming pool in the park. It's so hard to believe the pool's not there anymore. My heart breaks whenever I go to the park and think about how it once was, how it is now, and how it will never be again... (W.P. – 29/06/2012 – 18:17)

Reply:

Dear W.P., it was the only option. All the pools were connected to the same electrical system. The problems with the indoor pools had consequences for the outdoor pools too. If the outdoor pools had stayed open, it would almost certainly have caused another mechanical failure. I'm glad that at least they managed to avoid that. (D.V. – 17/07/2012 – 8:34)

Reply:

Bullshit. What the management got completely wrong was that they thought a fancy indoor pool was what was needed, but requests for a simple large open-air pool were never considered. People from Turnhout don't need heated water. (M.V. – 02/04/2017 – 22:32)

Quarter past seven, cold water, short circuit. Already awake for four hours. Never been in a public swimming pool this early before. Last night my love left me, these are the first, desperate hours, and I swim for an hour and a half. Arms and legs, empty and heavy. Chest, out of breath. Stomach, stabbing pains. Skin, soaked in chlorinated water. Mouth, not drowned. Lips just above the surface. No lovers attached to the side of the swimming pool.

On the bus home, I fall asleep until I'm past the stop where I should be getting off. Still, I wake up in my bed at home and immediately fall back to sleep, deep, all the way to the bottom of the swimming pool. I'm back in the 25-metre lane. Stroke by stroke, I swim to the other side. Narrative time and narrated time coincide in this dream, and so I soon confuse the dream with my recent swimming. Suddenly movement becomes more difficult, the water grows thicker. When I reach the middle of the lane, I can't go any further. The water is a milky colour now. There are no other swimmers, no witnesses. The milk feels warm, is warming up, I feel the milky water around me becoming perceptibly warmer and I let myself slide down. Just for a moment, I think, immersing myself in the thick, white warmth. Until I remember that I need breath and, in a panic, swim back up. At the surface, I encounter a moving membrane, elastic: it gives when I push against it, but it does not break. There is no opening. I cannot burst through the skin on the warm milk.

"SWIMMING IN MILK" says the newspaper headline a few days later, on Thursday 11 June 2009. On Wednesday afternoon, the water in the big pool at the swimming centre in Turnhout turned a milky white colour. The supervisor at the pool, Peter R., was not concerned at first: "When it's busy, substances can enter the water and cause discoloration. It happens more often in the summer," he says reassuringly.

However, there was panic among the swimmers. A child playing with his father in the front part of the big pool swallowed some of the milky water and vomited a number of times. Several swimmers testified that the water was giving off a suspicious chemical smell. An elderly lady was pulled to the side in a swoon: she thought Our Lord had touched the water with his presence and turned it into milk, as had happened in the Bible with water and wine.

When, half an hour later, the last of the swimmers had left the pool as a precaution, a power outage caused the scanning system for the wristbands to fail. The decision was made to evacuate the pool immediately.

The next morning, the water remained cloudy, whitish. There was some concern that grey water might have ended up in the pool, water that is normally used to clean the showers and flush the toilets. Peter R.'s reaction: "Well, it's still clean water, just not clean enough to swim in."

The following day, the Provincial Institute for Hygiene comes to take water samples. It will be at least forty-eight hours before the results are available. It looks as if the swimming pool is going to stay closed until Monday. In the meantime, there is nothing to do but take the white water and rinse, rinse, rinse.

Good news – the custom-made filter that is supposed to solve some of the structural problems in the pool will arrive in Turnhout earlier than expected.

As soon as the filter is delivered, a few days of test runs are planned. This consists of wetting the pool as if thousands of people have been swimming in it. Depending on the results, there is a chance the swimming pool will reopen before the Christmas holiday.

But the swimming pool does not open in the Christmas holiday of 2009, or in January 2010. Presumably the basin of the big pool has been leaking like a sieve, and the water is seeping through the joints, through the concrete into the basement, where it is dripping onto the electric cables. For now, no one wants to be the first to make the point that the concrete will have to be cast again.

"You say the concrete is letting water through. We say that there are leaks. There are also cracks, gaps and perforations that could be causing the leaks in the basement, remember that, and start looking beyond just what you want to see. You think it's all goddamn true before it's even happened," is the message from the council communication service.

In part ten of the collected work of Charles Darwin, I read a piece about the expression of emotions in humans and animals. He talks about the "grief muscles". These muscles are in the face and go into action when we are dealing with death, sadness and failure. More than as an outward expression of our inner life, Darwin, entirely in line with the rationalist impetus of the nineteenth century, views grief as a contraction of these muscles, as a physical reaction. The grief muscles are connected to one another. Squeezing the eyebrows together presses the corners of the mouth down and also has an influence on the circulation of the blood in the face, making the complexion pale, the muscles sag and the eyelids drop and the head sink onto the chest. Lips, cheeks and lower jaw make a downward movement because of their concentrated weight. So that, according to Darwin, is why we say that someone's face "falls" when hearing about bad news or experiencing a failure. A failure in the eyes of other people can also lead to a "loss of face". Our face falls off us. We lose it. We are no longer someone. Or at least we are not recognizable as such.

This is just figurative language. No need for me to read too much into it.

Given the lack of their own swimming pool, the schools of Turnhout were forced in the 1990s and early 2000 to offer swimming lessons two villages away. I almost drowned once in the swimming pool in Arendonk, but no one took it seriously.

The last swimming lesson before the holiday we always had “fun pool”. Brightly coloured foam and inflatable toys awaited us in the water: pool noodles, floating mats, balls, swimming boards and a belly slide across the length of the practice pool. I was sitting on a red foam floating mat with the fat boy in my class, waiting for my turn on the belly slide, when he told me he was in love with me and then, startled by his own confession, shoved me off the mat. I did not see the shove coming. The boy’s weight gave it more force than he intended, so I went flying backwards and ended up under the mat. Instinctively, I tried to push the mat up, to where the air was, but with the fat kid still on it, I simply could not lift it. I panicked. Again I tried to push the mat up. It didn’t work and, during that initial realization that it wasn’t working, I felt a thin thread appear in my head, I can’t describe it in any other way, I felt a thin thread being stretched across the diameter of my skull. As if the air that was slowly running out were being compressed into that thread and I had to hold on tight to that thread of breath inside my head.

When I think back now to those few moments of suffocation under the mat, it scares me how quickly I actually gave up, how little instinct for survival that moment shows.

The playing children and the wild water splashing all around must have caused the mat to drift from the spot. It was only when I noticed that the mat could move horizontally that I realized I wasn’t trapped at all, but simply had to swim out from underneath to be free.

A gasp for air on surfacing. I pulled myself to the ladder and once I had climbed up onto the side, I cried the whole swimming centre down. The lifeguard, who had several functions and was also my gymnastics teacher and ran the after-school club, came over to comfort me. When I told him I’d almost drowned under the red mat, he said: “I’m sure you didn’t.”

On 18 April 2011, the swimming pool reopens after having been closed for four hundred and forty-three days. At seven o’clock in the morning, there is a good number of early swimmers at the door.

Everyone who had a membership at the time the centre closed in 2009 is to receive a free extension for the length of the closure as compensation. Around a hundred people go to the cash desk to have the missing days of swimming added to their card.

By a quarter past twelve, there is a line of about forty swimmers for the electronic system that checks the wristbands. The system has collapsed.

After twenty minutes of waiting, a broken fuse is found – it probably blew because of the overloaded access system that had to extend the memberships this morning.

Ten minutes later, the first swimmers have got changed. In the corridor from the changing rooms to the swimming pool, they get stopped. The chlorine content in the water is on the high side. Some of the swimmers are justifiably angry and leave.

After a quick check, the swimmers are permitted to jump into the water. Some of them think they're being made fools of, while others are mostly just relieved that it is still possible to swim. Shortly after the first splashes, the lights go off. Power failure. The lockers are powered by electricity too. The swimmers have to wait in the darkness, still in their swimwear. Meanwhile there are eighty impatient schoolchildren out in the lobby.

Then the cause of the power failure is found. No one is informed about what went wrong, but the fault is repaired. After getting changed, the eighty schoolchildren take turns jumping off the diving boards of the three reserved sports lanes and begin the 500-metre crawl.

When the children are out of the water, the cafeteria closes and the people on the ticket desk bite the bullet: because of all the problems, it's better to close for the time being until Sunday's competition.

On Sunday, the competition is cancelled. The swimming pool remains closed.

All setbacks can be overcome. After some years, the permanent closure recently became temporary again. With a stubbornness that, to the best of my knowledge, does not occur anywhere else, the plans for a new swimming centre were implemented in exactly the same location, in spite of the likelihood of further subsidence in the same swampy soil. The target date for the reopening was spring 2014. This time it was all going to go just fine. After all, it was no longer just about building a new swimming centre. More than that, it was an opportunity to correct mistakes, to pick up that fallen face and to put it back in its place. The new swimming pool would not only satisfy the stranded swimmers, but also symbolize a new, successful beginning. Central to the plans was a move to a new electrical system in order to prevent power outages and faulty groundwater pumps. This would involve building two new machinery rooms. It would be easier to monitor the problems with the ventilation and the water treatment that had existed in the past.

The former wild-water slide is to be demolished.

Where the problematic basement once was, there will now be a new machinery room up on a platform. The platform will also have three children's pools adjoining the cafeteria.

The 25-metre pool will remain.

The wave pool is going to disappear. In its place, there will be a teaching pool with a moving bottom and a plunge pool for the new slide.

The new slide will be 60 metres long, with, halfway down, a built-in camera to take photographs of the swimmers as they slide down – inspired by the technology of the log flume ride at the Bobbejaanland theme park. Swimmers will be able to purchase these photographs afterwards, in the form of a keyring or printed in one of three themes: natural, pirates or dolphins.

The sauna and the whirlpool will stay, but will have a new look.

The city council has chosen to build a new swimming centre, instead of investing in the renovation of the old one. The cost difference could be recovered within five years. Yes, the budgets do take into account unexpected costs and maintenance work.

In the end, it will take until February 2017 for the new swimming centre to open. Barely a month later, it has to close temporarily again: toxic chlorine fumes were released during school swimming lessons. Another three months later, a glum group of regular evening swimmers find themselves in front of a closed door, as “it is no longer financially feasible to keep the swimming centre open after 6 p.m.”

Did the failed swimming centre really drive the architect to tie a rope around an overhead pipe on the basement ceiling and to kick the stool out from under his feet? When is a failure worth dying for? What I actually want to ask is: when does a mistake become bigger than a life, or so vast that life itself becomes a failure? Where is the seam between the maker and the work?

A trail began in Turnhout, on home soil, where most stories begin, and has led me to thirteen constructions that would prove to be fatal errors for their architects. Over the course of three years, I visited these “places of failure”. In order to recover these architects from their fiascos, to pick up their faces, to do something to counter the uselessness of their despair, the absolute nature of their deed. In moments of megalomania, I thought perhaps I could still prevent them from acting, in retrospect. At least, that is the kind of thing I said to myself at first.

p 237-262

XII – Crandall's Knickerbocker Theatre (1917–1922), Washington DC
Reginald Wycliffe Geare (1889–1927)

Two evenings a week, Dr Joseph Elward makes house calls. That includes this evening, in spite of the bad weather. One of his regular patients, Mrs Wilson, a young widow at 1704 Northwest Street, has a severe case of bronchitis that requires treatment. In normal conditions, it takes five minutes at most to walk from his suite in the Northumberland Apartments to her house, but because of the heavy snowfall he is fifteen minutes late, sinking up to his knees with each footstep. According to the most recent measurements, there is around sixty centimetres of snow on the ground. The whole street is whited out. Since yesterday afternoon, it has not stopped snowing, new flakes are constantly falling, razor-sharp frost, hundreds of microscopic blades – the snow seems to be scratching his eyes out.

“Heavens, Doc, your pants are soaked through!” Mrs Wilson cries out in the doorway. He squeezes past her and inside. She makes an attempt to brush the snow from his trousers, but the doctor steps away. “Under no circumstances should you be standing in this draught, Mrs Wilson. Will you lead the way upstairs?”

In her two-room apartment, the coal stove is burning, and there is little oxygen in the room. Without waiting for his instructions, Mrs Wilson unbuttons her woollen pinafore and the blouse underneath, her bustier showing in the open neck. Under the wet fabric of his trousers, his skin tightens – so cold that it burns.

He takes the stethoscope from his medical bag, listens to her bronchial tubes rattling. As she breathes in, it sounds as if someone is moving prayer beads inside her chest, a wheeze climbing up the string. Her condition is significantly worse. Is Mrs Wilson coughing up blood?

Before she can admit that she is, he hears the boom. The noise is overwhelming and hard to interpret at first, as if it consists of different parts, or is at least so inconceivably and violently loud that its impact penetrates to him only one part at a time. The tremendous quake of the first crash is followed by the sound of smaller bangs, shortly after each other, which in turn break up into a sharper, yet still heavy noise, unwieldy shards, stone shattering into pieces.

Dr Elward grabs his bag from the floor. Instinctively, he begins to run towards the noise, down Mrs Wilson’s stairs, out of the front door and left, down the street, then right on Champlain Street, going past the swimming baths, past the school, then left again, from this point he can hear the screaming begin through the din, it is still far off and these are not cries for help, but the screams that Dr Elward knows from Europe, from the field hospitals of the First World War, the screaming that is beyond help, a pleading prayer for death. So much noise, such an immense amount of noise through which he has to make his way, he is hardly even aware of the resistance of the snow, the screaming that lies ahead of him is pushing him back harder.

At the corner of Kalorama Road and 18th Street, he spots the first bystanders gathered. Before Dr Elward can ask what has happened, he sees a boy stumbling onto the street in a state of semi-consciousness, who loses his footing on the slippery ground and falls. His right arm is missing.

“I’m a doctor! I’m a doctor!” Elward shouts, as he runs to the boy in the middle of the street, he shouts it so loud, the snow is looser here because of the tyre tracks, the blood spreads quickly in the sludge. Dr Elward slips. The stethoscope swings around his neck like a severed noose. Mrs Wilson in her bustier in the room without oxygen, she flashes through his head.

“Keep still, boy. I’m a doctor. I’m going to bandage the wound.” Elward rips a strip of lining from his coat and wraps it around the shattered shoulder blade.

“My soul, Doctor! You’re cutting off my arm. Please! Don’t cut off my arm!” the boy wails, his eyeballs rolling in their sockets, but he remains conscious. His right arm must have remained behind in the

place he ran from, but the whole street is dark and snow-covered, and Dr Elward has learned to switch off his imagination in such situations, so he does not think about the place the arm might be lying or what must have happened there. It is a little after nine and he needs to stop the bleeding in the place that is here, in the place where the right arm is missing, and that is all Dr Elward needs to know.

In the moments that follow, the corner of 18th Street fills up. The emergency services arrive. Firefighters and police officers come along Columbia Road, they order the bystanders to follow them towards the Knickerbocker Theatre. A priest makes himself known and leads the way. There is still that constant screaming, within which words now begin to form.

"My wife's inside!"

"What happened, Officer?"

"My God, hundreds of people must have been crushed in there!"

Dr Elward leaves the boy with an ambulance and follows the bewildered bystanders and the emergency services into the dark street, through the snow flurries, the rain of knives, into the maw of that disastrous night of 28 January 1922.

Ten kilometres overhead, a meteorological event is occurring, which had already caused it to start snowing in Washington DC in the late afternoon of Friday 27 January 1922. It is a kind of congestion in the atmosphere. Polar winds from the high-pressure area over Greenland are meeting the jet stream above the north-eastern United States. A constant ice-cold arctic wind is sweeping down through a depression and into the eastern coastal region. Snow. From Rhode Island to Cape Hatteras, skates and sleds are brought out, but the local weather forecast in DC labels the winter fun as premature: the snow is not expected to last for long.

But it snows all night. On the morning of 28 January, Washington is covered in a carpet of forty-five centimetres, and it keeps snowing. The whole city is paralyzed. Nine trains are evacuated between Virginia and DC. Trams become snowed in on the tracks. Drivers abandon their cars in the street. Anyone who is travelling today is better off doing so on foot, but that is not without risk either: in the middle of the snowy lawn in front of the Smithsonian Castle, a man sinks up to his waist, he genuinely believes he is about to drown. Two firefighters have to come and calm him down, accompanying him out of the sea of snow, arm in arm. One hundred and fifty extra street sweepers per neighbourhood are called in. Dozens of trucks set off to clear the streets, but they become stuck in the snow too. Most of the stores take a snow day, with just a few small independent operators bravely remaining open, such as Mr Bernard Nordlinger from the gentlemen's outfitters on M Street, who has enlisted his four nephews to keep the sidewalk clear: the boys shovel non-stop, but it is a hopeless task, the snow goes on falling, and with the same intensity. According to the measurements, there is an accumulation of two and a half centimetres per hour.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, sixty centimetres is measured. The mood changes. What at first was trouble and inconvenience now has all the glory of a record: snowflakes for twenty four hours straight!

The abandoned vehicles, the stranded motorists, the helpless slipping and sliding – it all gives way to fearless snowball fights. An energetic woman starts digging out her car. A shy man in his twenties picks up the girl he is secretly in love with, throws her over his shoulder and carries her high above the snow to the other side of the street. Photographers seize the momentum and take historic snow portraits of the White House, the Capitol and the Treasury Building, archive images in the present.

Some people close the curtains and count the canned food in the pantry. Others mention the word "apocalypse". One woman falls asleep for a moment and dreams that the snow is up to her window on the ninth floor. When she wakes with a start, she thinks: it was a dream about death! Every half hour, the radio gives updates about the weather situation and the latest safety precautions. Elderly and vulnerable people are advised to remain indoors. The Potomac lies motionless under its thick layer of ice.

And, just like that, in the space of one night, the world is buried. The snow lies over DC like a shroud. Objects lose their definition. It could be a skyscraper under there, or a huge tree trunk, but actually it no longer matters what is under the snow. The white itself has become a form. In this new white world, new laws apply and different meanings. Perhaps this was once Mr Robertson's town car, but now it has transformed into a fort for some children from the neighbourhood. A step can no longer be measured by the space between two feet as they move forward, but manifests itself in depth, in how far a foot sinks into the snow. Time becomes relative, and cheap – the economy has virtually come to a standstill. People become reconciled to the constant sensation of a wet overcoat.

At eight o'clock in the evening on 28 January, the measurements indicate seventy-one centimetres of snow, and it is still falling. The overwhelming amount and the uninterrupted snowfall have given the white the impression of permanence: this is how the world will look from now on, redesigned and erased.

In the midst of this confusion, the residents of Washington decide they had best fit their old lives into the new, snow-dictated regime as quickly as possible. On Saturday evening, some taxi drivers – reckless as taxi drivers are, they all think they can drive the best – venture out onto the snow-filled streets. They do good business that night, as quite a few pioneers are heading out again into that dense world of snow, in search of entertainment. It *is* Saturday, after all.

The Knickerbocker Theatre also decides to let the planned showings go ahead. It is comedy night, the most popular evening of the week. In spite of the storm, around three hundred of the seventeen hundred seats are sold. The movie is *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford*. Sam Hardy, who later, in 1933, will act in the first King Kong movie, and Norman Kerry play two convicted con artists, Wallingford and Chester. They disguise themselves as businessmen looking for an investment. In a small village, they drum up money to start a factory that manufactures carpet tacks. The villagers soon suspect fraud, but the professional scammer Wallingford talks them around. Until someone shows up and wants to buy the tack factory...

Just before it happens, a wave of laughter goes around the auditorium – Wallingford sits on a tack and, groaning, grabs his backside. It is shortly after nine. Outside, the gusts of snow are slashing the darkness to shreds, as the neon letters glow in the midst of the swirling white:

CRANDALL'S KNICKERBOCKER THEATRE

The storm has been raging for twenty-nine hours now. During this time, a layer of snow sixty-one centimetres thick has collected on the roof of the movie theatre, with a weight of sixty-three kilograms per square metre. In total, there is a load of around seven thousand kilograms of accumulated snowflakes up there on the roof. The crystalline form of an individual snowflake is generally too fragile to reach the ground intact, but in this unified mass they cause the roof, anchored with steel beams, to collapse. The roof itself weighs two thousand kilos in some parts, ten thousand kilos in others. This mass of steel and stone and snow comes down in its entirety, in one piece, the complete surface area, as if someone had cut out the roof around the edges. The balcony breaks the fall of the crashing weight for a brief moment before being dragged down below.

A survivor reconstructs the facts for a newspaper, saying that a "hearty peal of laughter" preceded the collapse of the roof. He wished there had been some room for human resistance, no matter how small, in that ruthless noise. The stone and the steel did not care that bones were pulled from their flesh, the annihilation was inevitable, no one stood a chance.

The painting *Cupid Complaining to Venus* by Lucas Cranach the Elder from 1525 contains an alarming image. Anyone who takes a quick glance sees, on Cupid's squat naked body, the face of Donald Trump. Next to him, Venus stands wearing nothing but an ostentatious hat, with the branches of a fruit-covered tree draped around her wrist and ankle. Both figures are in the foreground of the canvas within a rustic scene on the edge of a dense and dark forest. The tree with its peach-like fruits marks a boundary in the landscape, which in the background turns into an open panorama with water and a rock formation. Half dark, half light.

Cranach was painting a scene from Theocritus' *Idylls*, in which the little god Cupid is plagued by bees. Wailing, he runs to his mother, Venus: "The stings! They're so painful." He cries and complains.

Venus is not entirely surprised by this turn of events. After all, Cupid still has the honeycomb in his hands, his mouth is freshly smeared with stolen honey. But she does not say that it is his own fault, she sees it as a teaching moment and tells young Cupid that love has two sides: "Sometimes it is sweet, sometimes devastating."

"But how can something as small as the sting of a bee cause so much pain?" asks Cupid – a naïve and, if you ask me, hypocritical question.

"You're small too, but your arrows can cause even more pain," Venus reassures him. Power is a matter of outbidding each other. Exactly what the little tyrant wanted to hear.

I saw this painting in the summer of 2016 at the National Gallery in London. Maybe the transformation of Cupid's face into Trump's was due to a moment of distraction, an optical illusion, a chance mixing of images.

I do not rule out that, during that period – I was going through an unfair episode of heartbreak – Cupid was not my favourite mythological character, and that I therefore, perhaps unknowingly, maybe intentionally, demonized him. I was probably just tired. Fatigue makes you lose focus.

However, it felt first and foremost like an omen. A few months later, when Trump was elected president and I spent days in an ineffectual state of indignation, I thought back to the painting and the little Cupid, desperately trying to give some meaning to the distorted image.

It is January 2019, I am in Washington DC and the American government is at a standstill. Two and a half years after Trump's appointment, the indignation can no longer keep up and does not even attempt to do so. The government shutdown has been going on for a couple of weeks. President Trump has stuck out his sting: he has closed down the government because he wants to build a grotesque dystopian wall in the southern states and the Democrats will not allow it. Until he gets his way, he whines despotically in every news broadcast about how right he is. On the TV screen, his mouth dripping with stolen honey, he unhesitatingly accuses the bees: *For five billion dollars, the wall, the beautiful wall, will block migrants from South and Central America – so many migrants! – and also stop the decline of the global economy and end the narcotics trade. The wall might seem expensive, but it's not. Really not. You have to see it like this: in practice it's going to pay for itself, because all those Latinos, who are willing to work for a few cents, won't be competing with America's unemployed. There'll be space on the labour market for all you wonderful Americans. Because those migrants steal American jobs and their drugs kill American kids. The wall should have been there a long time ago, but you know the nasty Dems don't want it. Then El Chapo and the whole Sinaloa Cartel would never have gotten a gram over the border.*

Trump's economic advisor Kevin Hassett completely agrees and does not see what people are so concerned about: *Because of the government shutdown some people might not have any pay, but they're getting extra vacation.*

Taxi drivers are like predators in the empty streets of DC. The shutdown means that there are few if any businesspeople, members of Congress or journalists to transport. Anyone moving about on the streets is possible prey. Stop for a moment or walk too close to the edge of the sidewalk, and you run the risk of finding yourself in a taxi and being forced to come up with a destination, preferably on the other side of the city to keep the meter nice and busy.

Standing on the corner of 3rd Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, I am in the lion's den, unmistakably a tourist, with the Capitol to my right and the start of the long National Mall to my left. There really is no one else about. The wide avenues are dead, the National Mall deserted apart from a few joggers, the Smithsonian Museums shut, the Capitol's visitor centre closed.

I try to imagine ever being so desperately alone, as if in some post-apocalyptic Spielberg film, with, say, the Eiffel Tower. Monumental buildings on this scale were not tailored to the individual experience; they need an audience, passers-by, travellers, enthusiasts, even if it is only stray cats, but whoever it might be, these buildings require collective eyes that confirm them as part of a shared space. Having to be alone with these buildings is overwhelming.

The pushy taxi cabs try to woo me, but I cannot get in. I already belong to Georgia and her grey Escort. Like most people who have not received their payslip for the third week in a row, Georgia is trying her luck as an Uber driver. As soon as I get in, she tries to convince me that this is a prime example of the American spirit, the hands-on approach, no one else is going to do it for you, you just have to pick yourself back up. Her company, which caters for Congress, has not received any orders for three and a half weeks, so now she is doing Uber. The bills don't pay themselves and she and her young sons need to eat. In the rear-view mirror, I can see that she is putting on a brave face. She drops me off in the Adams Morgan neighbourhood, by the plaza where 18th Street and Columbia Road meet at the tip of an isosceles triangle. This is where Harry Crandall's Knickerbocker Theatre once stood, named after the businessman Harry Crandall, built by the young architect Reginald Wycliffe Geare. Now there is a branch of the SunTrust Bank on the spot, brown bricks slammed shut, a building in the shape of a typewriter. Hey, I will remember to give Georgia a five-star review on Uber, won't I?

Reginald Geare is twenty-eight when he completes the Knickerbocker Theatre in 1917. The palatial cinema made of Indiana limestone is a milestone in his budding career. There is no skimping on costs or resources. Harry Crandall buys the piece of land for sixty thousand dollars. Geare calculates the construction costs at one hundred and fifty thousand dollars – a fortune in those days, but he is planning to recoup the money in no time.

After some failed investments in the casino world, Harry Crandall turns his attention to the film industry in 1910. He has a hunch that this is where it is all going to happen and that he should take that hunch seriously. Hasn't he seen all around him the bank directors, the stockbrokers, the members of Congress, the heirs, and their common denominators: bulging wallets and a complete lack of imagination about what on earth to spend all that money on, all of them fallen into the trap of a bourgeois existence, chained to their indolent comfort, clerks of covetousness, yearning for distraction from this harrowing self-insight, from the shadow play on the wall of their sealed-off cave, their desire for fantasy worlds, vaudeville, movie posters, young doe-eyed actresses, concerts, red carpets and all the rest?

Yes, Harry Crandall saw it. He sees that rich folk, like their fellow citizens from the lower social classes, want to be blinded by glamour, commerce and escapism. It turns out that they are not in search of intellectual advancement; ultimately they just want to have a good time. He sees the European film market shift to America because of the First World War. He sees the Hollywood template and the success rate of its reproduction. He sees the distinction between high and low culture becoming blurred. Harry Crandall sees it all. Now he just needs to provide an infrastructure for these desires.

It is no coincidence that he has his first movie theatre built, in 1916, at 437–439 9th Street in the heart of Washington's business district. His hunch does not let him down. The five o'clock movie always sells out and most of the seats for that showing are filled by men in three-piece suits, slumped in the plush seats, jackets unbuttoned. This success propels Crandall to the status of Washington's movie magnate. It would be bad business not to consider expansion. A big movie theatre downtown, oh, what the hell: a big movie theatre in every part of the city. Within a few months, Crandall has made enough profit to remodel another new movie theatre. He buys the Savoy Theatre on 14th Street, a building in the grand, traditional Colonial Revival style. Eight weeks and a few thousand dollars later, the brick box has been transformed into a Beaux-Arts palace with a balcony – an addition that doubles the number of seats. As well as installing the balcony, he considerably increases the size of the lobby. This spacious area, combined with the green marble columns, lends a certain pomp to the foyer. He has the interior of the auditorium transformed into a boudoir of gold, pink and ivory. Grandeur for the masses. Low culture in an opulent palace with the atmosphere of an opera house. Sufficient luxury for the wealthy, while providing the less fortunate with a backdrop for their dreams.

Crandall develops this formula into a marketing strategy. The idea of upgrading existing properties comes from the young architect who renovated the Apollo Civic Theatre in Martinsburg for him, Reginald Wycliffe Geare, who graduated just a few years earlier from George Washington University and just completed his further education as a draughtsman. For the austere exterior of the Apollo Civic, Geare came up with a contrasting and opulent interior of pale-blue velvet and golden ornamentation. It is like being inside the jewellery box of an eligible aristocrat. Crandall saw stone turn into gold.

In November 1915, six months after the reopening of the Apollo Civic, Geare places the blueprints for the construction of the Knickerbocker Theatre on Crandall's desk. While Crandall's first movie theatres were palaces, the Knickerbocker would become a temple, a profane altar made to measure for the oligarchs he wanted to make reach for their wallets.

Anyone coming along Columbia Road can see the neon letters on the plaza in front of the building: "Crandall's Knickerbocker Theatre". The entrance is just around the corner on 18th Street, under a concrete canopy with an illuminated board announcing the movie screenings. When you pass through the entrance, you enter the spacious foyer, which takes up the entire street side of the building on 18th Street. Marble floor and crystal chandeliers. A premium candy store. On the ground floor is the "refreshment parlor" and there is a balcony tearoom. The cinema experience stretches out before and after the movie. The auditorium has a capacity of seventeen hundred moviegoers and runs in a funnel shape towards the stage – the acoustics are amazing. Built-in Typhoon fans give the visitors the sensation of a gentle breeze during a ride in a convertible on a summer's day. This luxury extends to the smallest details: the furniture in the orchestra pit is covered with silk.

Meanwhile the newspapers are closely following Crandall's investments. The grand opening of the Knickerbocker on 13 October 1917 receives a great deal of attention from the press, partly because of the presence of the movie stars hired by Crandall for the opening night. He shows the romantic drama *Betsy*

Ross, about the patriotic title figure who is supposed to have sewn the first American flag. Alice Brady, who plays Betsy, is present in person with her current beau, Carlyle Blackman. All seventeen hundred seats are sold.

The following morning, the reviewers crown Reginald Geare the "master builder of the silent-movie era". His career has been launched. Crandall will work with his golden boy, Reggie Geare, on other theatres, including The Metropolitan, The York and The Lincoln. In his heyday, Crandall owns no fewer than eighteen profitable movie theatres in DC and Virginia.

It is not unlikely that the steel girders supporting the roof of the Knickerbocker began their gradual deviation that very first evening, a deviation that, four years later, when combined with the added weight of the load of snow, would result in disaster.

I already knew that I would not see the Knickerbocker. However, the absence on the spot felt emptier than I had anticipated. The bank that came in its stead is a dismal culmination of the architectural history of this place. Since the 1970s, the bank, with its unimaginative bricks, has slammed shut over the turbulent past of the surface upon which it is built. There is a concave line in the façade, which is reminiscent of the shape of a stage, but with the best will in the world it cannot be seen as an allusion.

A year after the collapse, in 1923, a new theatre was built on the location of the Knickerbocker: the Ambassador, and it did good business for decades. In the late 1960s, the cinema auditorium was transformed into a cult venue for the hippie movement. Jimi Hendrix gives his legendary DC debut there in '67. Less than two years later, the owners need to have it demolished. The site falls into the hands of a property developer, who sells the land to the SunTrust Bank. The square in front of the building is renamed SunTrust Plaza. 18th Street is today the main artery of the yuppie Adams Morgan neighbourhood, a succession of world-food restaurants. Italian, McDonald's, Songbyrd music house and record café, barbecue, pizzeria, a Swedish coffeehouse, a ramen bar, a Turkish restaurant, an Indian, a Korean place, half of which is a tattoo parlour, falafel, a display window with vintage clothing, another pizzeria.

Near the site of the former Knickerbocker, among the restaurants on 18th Street, is the Idle Times Bookstore. Two floors and a landing crammed with second-hand books. The possibility of rare editions beckons from every bookcase. That distinctive, sour scent of old paper wafts from the shelves. In a bookcase right at the back of the first floor, I scan the spines. On the top shelf is a brown sticking plaster and written on it in marker pen: "Non-fiction". I am searching for John McPhee in the hope of a consultation. My idea is to learn from him how to be less present in the book I want to write. McPhee writes narrative non-fiction, he is narrator, character and camera, but never omniscient or radically documentary, and he is certainly not a misplaced extra getting in the way of his subject – there is not an ounce of wanting to create a profile for himself. He is more a sort of embodied voice. Without him having to do anything, you accept that it is him, a man of flesh and blood that you are getting to read, a man who is present both in the text and in the world. He lends his eyes and thoughts, experiences the object of his writing, exorcizes it through research, and is able to articulate it all in the form of irresistible discoveries. A few narrative

interventions in the real world, no more than that. For 8.99 dollars, I buy *Oranges*, McPhee's classic reportage about oranges, and for 12.99 the collected work of Anne Sexton.

That fatal night, when Reggie Geare arrived at the Knickerbocker, his body's first reaction was to repel the image of the horror that had taken place, as if his nervous system wanted to protect him from the police barricade, the stretchers and the mutilated bodies, the snow clearers working like gravediggers, the pickaxes and crowbars tirelessly bashing away at wood and stone, making a way through, the sirens, the screams of the multitude standing around. In the midst of it all, he saw the four walls of his building, still standing. What on earth could have happened in there if the walls were still upright? They pointed at heaven for a mercy that was denied to him forever as soon as the shock invaded his body: the walls had no roof.

Like a madman, he pushes through the barrier to assist the rescue workers. He knows the building inside out. He has two arms.

But manpower alone was not enough. Derricks and machinery, hydraulic jacks and cranes were needed, crucial in the attempt to remove the debris as carefully as possible. Until late in the afternoon of the following day, some hope still remained that survivors might be found among the crushed bodies and the heavy rubble.

In *The Last Poet*, a twenty-minute-long video-essay by the American visual artist David Hartt, the camera explores an undefined neighbourhood on the edge of an unnamed city somewhere on the east coast. A truck park. A junkyard. The metal housing of a public telephone box without a phone. A church. White plastic garden chairs. The wind is blowing. Streets with row upon row of the same prefab homes. A plant shoot breaking through slabs. Someone runs across the street and catches a bus. The bridge in the distance is under construction. The river flowing under the bridge is a grey-brown colour. Over the images, Francis Fukuyama's voice says: "This deep historical sense where you want to preserve old things, ruins, we haven't gotten there. Americans still want to start all over again."

After the First World War, Europe is in ruins, but the United States is experiencing an economic boom in the early 1920s. Isolationist foreign policies keep other people's problems at a distance, while the home market is thriving on the momentum of the new capitalism. Mass production results in larger scales, and so prosperity increases exponentially – a Ford Model T for everyone! In the midst of this illusion of prosperity, space is found for the development of the individual – although only the middle class and above qualifies, and first and foremost white Americans. Optimism is an infectious microbe in those days, and Reggie Geare also sees life as a journey to personal happiness and fulfilment.

Around the time of his first architectural success, he marries the beautiful Dorothy Smallwood at St Margaret's Episcopal Church. There are three bridesmaids: Marie Tunstall, Marguerite Weller and Lela Howard. All three are green with envy. Each of them would quite happily have knifed their friend in the back in order to run off with the young architect. He is brimming with promise, has a boyish mischief and the mysterious and unfathomable air of an artist about him.

Some years later, when Marie, Marguerite and Lela each receive the same phone call from their friend Dorothy, after their initial shock at the news, they consider themselves lucky that it is not their husband who has all those deaths on his conscience.

At some point on 29 January 1922, it must have stopped snowing. In the days after that, it will have started to thaw, but he sees none of this. After the disaster, Reggie Geare does not leave his home for a week. He does not speak to anyone, not even his wife. Only when the court summons him does he get dressed to go to the hearing at the District Building. According to witnesses, he is as pale as a corpse, and his eyes have the look of a man possessed.

He is questioned for eight days. Geare does not assume his own innocence, he is just as motivated as the investigation committee to find out what happened and he cooperates constructively. He checks everything, draws the plans again and again, to make certain. Night after night, he reconstructs the theatre from the foundations up, brick by brick. What is he missing? Where did he make a mistake? In his defence: he does not see it.

The gruelling interrogations take their toll, his body slumping deeper and deeper into the chair. He cracks.

Now that Clyde Gearhart, Caroline Upshaw and Edward Williams are no longer in a critical condition, the official death count is ninety-five. A hundred other people were seriously injured, their visit to the cinema leaving many of them with lifelong disfigurements.

The court rules that the victims died as a result of faults in the design of the building, which the architect could have prevented. Reginald Geare is indicted with manslaughter. He will not ultimately be convicted by the court, but the accusation is a sufficient verdict for the public and posterity to hold him responsible.

It seems as if failure will one day become obsolete. The entirety of evolution is moving in that direction in a Hegelian way. Human beings constantly invent more and better tools to become more intelligent, attractive, efficient, healthy, strong, in general “longer-lasting”, in order to expand beyond the limitations of human existence. Failure, whether it is, on a small scale, the cup of coffee that I dropped and smashed when I was so tired that I lost control of my motor skills, or, on a large scale, the impossibility of curing terminal sicknesses, every form of failure contradicts this evolutionary development. It is no wonder that failure evokes existential angst when it is capable of casting doubt on the whole way we move out of history and towards the future. This angst, as is often the case, is assuaged by discourse. Trial and error. Learn from your mistakes. What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. Failing forward. Apparently a failure must always be accompanied by the notion that you have to push on even harder afterwards, that you must draw upon your failure for the success of your next goal. Failure is fertile ground for new achievements.

Sometimes my days appear to be a series of goals, stepping stones on the way to completion. Doing the dishes is an act of completion, writing a thousand words is an act of completion, getting out of bed is

itself an act of completion, as it means that I am making a movement to enter into the day, and after that day the next one, and that I am approaching life in the right direction, forwards, with progressive energy.

A failure contradicts that direction, it pushes back, annoyingly in the opposite way, towards non-existence. It is a trapdoor to the underlying void, a crack that makes the flaw visible. That crack is terrifying.

Perhaps it is a question of perspective: if failure touches upon non-existence, then death, from the perspective of life, is the fatal failure. From the perspective of death, the failure of life is completion. Non-failure would signify the triumph of life, the victory over death. Maybe in the act of suicide, completion and failure combine in the blackest of ways.

Of course, some philosophers, the sociologists and the psychologists, say that we are fundamentally imperfect, incomplete and searching beings, that the gulf between who we are and the dream of who we can become is a reassuring gap that will always be present within us, and it is just as well, because in that gap lies every form of aspiration, in that gap is the striving that drives us on.

What happened to Reggie Geare when the roof collapsed was the complete closure of that gap. Who he could be coincides forever with who he is at that moment: a fallible being who has made a fatal error that cost many lives.

In the following years, he fails to regain the dynamic in his character. Not only does he have to learn how to live with the victims, he is also forced to rethink himself, as no one wants to work with him now. He does not succeed in finding any kind of position for himself within his profession. His dream of building is buried with the dead beneath the collapsed roof. Reggie Geare is thirty-eight when he has to face that fact. At the same time, he sees the impossibility of reorienting himself. He is an architect. Do you have to do it to be it?

Geare dies in his home at 3047 Porter Street, just outside the now fashionable neighbourhood of Georgetown, in the northwest part of DC. He spends the day of his self-imposed death at the office. Five years after the disaster, he still shows up there every day, even though there is no work waiting for him. It keeps him going. As long as he has that office, he is an architect. On this day, unusually, he leaves after lunch to play golf. He gets home not too late and brings a box of candy for his wife Dorothy. Reggie seems relaxed, he is sweet, as always, and distant, as he has been ever since that day.

After dinner, he retreats to the attic, where he has a desk and a sleeping couch. When he is working late on his designs, he sometimes sleeps there so as not to wake Dorothy.

Although she hopes he will pull himself together and gradually start looking for a new job, Dorothy still thinks it brave of her husband to continue drawing designs. It is a point in his character around which she can orient herself, she recognizes it from the husband she had before the disaster. So that evening she does not disturb him. Reggie often says how grateful he is for the space she gives him. Everything takes its own time, she thinks, and he has a lot to process.

Before Reggie goes to sleep that night, he turns on the gas tap. The attic is lit with coal gas, a cocktail of hydrogen, methane, ethane, carbon monoxide and nitrogen. There is no gentler death than suffocation. The lungs still take in air, so they do not shut down in panic, but the air contains less and less oxygen, and a thread in the chest stretches, becoming thinner and thinner, until it snaps.

It is only when he does not appear at the breakfast table the following morning that Dorothy becomes worried. She repeatedly knocks at the attic door, slightly irritated that she has to call him to the table like a small child. As he also refuses to open the door, she curses at him. She rattles the handle, bends down to look through the keyhole, but sees nothing, that's strange, there's a rag stuffed into it, but before she can figure out what that means, she picks up a vague smell of gas. Although she does not yet know what he has done, she is still certain, because in a way it has been happening for years. So Dorothy knocks down the door, bruising her right shoulder. Reggie is in his pyjamas, lying peacefully stretched out on the couch. Dorothy turns off the gas and tries to resuscitate him. She is cursing even louder now. She calls the ambulance. The doctor comes and declares him dead.

The coroner asks about the tell-tale signs. Dorothy replies that he was quite healthy of late. Yes, he was worried about their financial situation now that there was no work coming in, but suicide? When does someone exhibit suicidal behaviour? How could she have recognized it?

There was the recurring dream that she would never know about, because Reggie never told her. The dream was simply too horrible:

A boy, he can't be any older than fifteen, is trapped under a piece of debris close to the entrance of the auditorium. He only just failed to escape. The rubble has crushed him from the waist down, but his upper body and head are free. The boy is not crying, he is not screaming, he is not groaning, he is not delirious with pain, he is doing everything he can to assist the rescue team. Blood is flowing through his dusty hair. Two doctors are providing first aid, while a dozen firefighters attempt to lift the huge weight from his lower body using hydraulic jacks.

"Boy, you're just as brave as any man in the trenches," says the doctor, who knows from his own experience that courage existed in the trenches in spite of the men's awareness that they did not stand a chance.

At a certain point, the boy is able to raise himself up a little on his elbows, he is suffering terrible, unimaginable pain, but he lifts himself up to watch the men's attempts to move the debris, he is determined to get out from under the stone. The boy in his dream is the boy about whom the *Washington Post* would write, the day after the disaster: "It was the American spirit intensified. [...] It was the supreme splendor of the nation in the face of crisis. It was boyhood risen to man's estate."

Every night, in Reggie Geare's dream, the boy raises himself up on his elbows again. Sometimes he experiences the dream from the perspective of the boy, looking at the stone crushing his lower body.

Sometimes he is one of the rescue workers, trying to lift the stone with all his might, but in vain. In his dream, he is never the doctor, who is, of course, equally unable to save him.

Harry Crandall is also ruined, although his initial reaction was resilient. Shortly after the disaster, he is advised to rebuild the theatre as quickly as possible, albeit with another architect. Crandall drops Geare and chooses his competitor, Thomas Lamb, who, in 1923, raises the Ambassador Theatre on the walls that are still standing. Although the new auditorium removes the debris from the streets, it is merely a sticking plaster on the wound. The shock of what happened that night in January would be felt for years. Crandall realizes that, in the eyes of the public, he also shares the blame. The golden days are over.

In 1927, he sells his empire to Warner Bros. Most of his palatial cinemas have since disappeared. At 1215 U Street, the Lincoln Theatre, a design by Geare, is still standing. The building has been classified as a historic monument, not for its architectural merits, but because of its historic value: the Lincoln was at the time the centre of Washington's "Black Broadway", built for an African–American audience excluded from other theatres by racial laws.

Fifteen years after the disaster, in 1937, Harry Crandall also commits suicide. The former millionaire's estate consists of a returned five-hundred-dollar diamond ring, a fifty-dollar watch, a few pieces of furniture and clothing, and a number of shares that have plummeted. He leaves a note asking the newspapers that will report his death not to be too hard on him. "I'm despondent," he writes, "and miss my theaters, oh so much."

The days after the disaster, the department for building inspection was swamped with requests to check homes and public buildings for safety. Under the roofs of Washington, a reasonable fear of collapse suddenly prevailed.

On 31 January 1922, the Bureau of Standards established an investigation committee to look at the Knickerbocker. Samples of the construction materials were taken and the safety regulations were checked against the situation on the site. This investigation would not comfort the bereaved or heal the injured, but they had to think about the future. The aim was not only to find out exactly what had happened and who should be held responsible, but also to contribute to the revision of the building code of the District of Columbia, which proved to be outdated; the regulations were not in line with modern construction methods.

In addition to the official investigation committee, dozens of external experts signed up to contribute to the report; among those who provided their expertise were the city architect of Chicago and a representative of the American Society of Civil Engineers. The report about the "Knickerbocker Disaster" showed that it was indeed the result of a construction error: the main roof truss came loose on the north side. This happened because of defects in the northernmost gusset plate of that truss and the underside of the truss in the wall.

The gusset plate was 1.27 centimetres thick and formed the only lateral stability for the heavy upper truss. The lower truss rested in the wall without any additional reinforcement. Both trusses were tilted and crushed by a combination of pressure, compression and torsion.

The weight and the pressure of the layer of snow caused a downward deviation in the main roof truss, which was designed in such a way that most of the pressure was on the walls. The trusses, however, were not adequately anchored within the walls. The cold and the wet had also caused the walls to swell, and so they had moved out from under the roof. The outward expansion of the walls and the downward movement of the trusses effectively sliced the roof out of its anchoring.

In the course of Reggie Geare's questioning, it came out that, during the construction, there had been a last-minute switch to cheaper, lighter materials as a result of the steel shortage caused by the First World War, but also because Crandall believed this would speed up the construction process. The architect agreed, but not before requesting approval from the Washington Building Department. He received this approval, but it was still his job to recalculate the loadbearing capacity. So the responsibility for the error could be traced back directly to Geare, acting under pressure from Crandall. On the other hand, the Knickerbocker Snowstorm had been so unusually severe. To what extent could the architect have anticipated that such a massive amount of snow would ever lie on the roof, or even fall from the sky? Amidst the heated emotions following the collapse, complaints were even lodged against district employees for not managing to keep the streets free of snow, and so allowing the emergency services to pass through freely. If even the snow clearers were being held responsible, it is not difficult to imagine the extent to which the public must have demonized Geare.

After the investigation, the building code was rewritten with increased attention to safety and prevention. A warning was included for all architects and property developers: "Safety first – from foundation to capstone."

Near the Brookland Metro station is the American Poetry Museum and Center for Poetic Thought. This is part of a large industrial building with all kinds of start-ups. In front of the window, which is more of a display, sits an older, somewhat stocky man, who beckons me in. The museum can be taken in at a glance, a small white space, not much larger than my living room. Four paintings hang on a wall. At the back is a modest bookcase and a microphone on a stand.

"Come on in, but don't expect too much from me yet," says the man, who introduces himself as Reuben. "I'm still a bit under-caffeinated."

Then he sits back down at his laptop in the display window. He is a little like an animal in the zoo, the contemporary poet in his habitat, with MacBook in a small white space, locked up behind glass. I think of Walter and his puzzle about the museum guard and the empty room.

The paintings do not do much for me, but I am excited as I browse the spines in the bookcase. Maybe they have a rare handwritten manuscript of John Ashbery's debut, or perhaps I can hold a first

edition of William Carlos Williams's *Spring and All* in my hands, look at Elizabeth Bishop's diary entries, leaf through the Pulitzer Prize-winning collected work of Wallace Stevens, but the bookcase does not live up to any of my expectations. It contains mostly anthologies and remaindered copies.

"Do you like poetry?" I hear Reuben say.

I try to hide my disappointment. "I'd pictured the American Poetry Museum a little differently."

"Hey, we get by. There's a downward trend in the book market. Poetry in particular is having a hard time right now. But, on a good night, we still get twenty, thirty people in the audience."

"Poetry always seems to be having a hard time," I say with a smirk.

Reuben says something sensitive about inner compulsion, and the transformative power of the poem, and I respond with an argument about resonance, metrical violence and a zest for life. We stay there for a while, talking like two caricatures. Poets are excellent at articulating the importance of poetry, they are experts at it, as they have to defend it so often. Reuben looks at the floor as he is formulating his thoughts, which increases the effect that he is excavating his words from a tender place inside himself. From similar discussions I've had with other poets, I summon forth what this kind of conversation requires me to say, and I try to say it with passion. Neither of us seems to feel much connection to the subject at the moment, but we owe it to our profession.

Reuben works as a volunteer at the museum and is also the curator of the Duke Ellington Collection at the Smithsonian. Jazz is his life, but his first love – and you never forget your first love, he adds – is poetry. In the 1990s, when he was still studying at university, he made his debut and had modest success. The collection took him to some nice places and made him some good contacts, but when the initial attention died down, he stopped.

"You should never write if you have nothing to say. It was almost thirty years before I had something to put on paper again. Now I'm getting old and transience is a rewarding theme," Reuben tells me with a degree of satisfaction.

"I admire you," I say, hoping that it sounds as sincere as I mean it to. Reuben has had the courage to wait, which seems to me by far the most honest thing an artist can do.

"Ah, I never needed my poems in order to survive. When you're in despair, then you write very different poetry," he says.

"Anne Sexton," I reply, and by that I mean equally Sylvia Plath, the South African Ingrid Jonker, the Swedish Karin Boye, and all the other women whose poetry hardly meant salvation. Every one of these poets checked out of life at an early age. I think of Anne Sexton's poem "Sylvia's Death":

how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long

the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston.

On the way to Dulles Airport, it is snowing, it has been snowing since yesterday evening, maybe I am simply not prepared for it, was not expecting to see snow until I reach the mountains in Colorado, maybe it is because the Uber driver is silently concentrating on the slippery road, and nothing and no one from outside has interrupted my thoughts for too long, but slowly I become caught up in it, perhaps because the air in front of me is so thick and white, and the ground is being buried deeper and deeper, the cars, the highway, the crash barriers, the road signs, the streetlights, the high-voltage wires, everything is losing its definition now that the snow is whiting out the world bit by bit; didn't Cioran say that "to embrace a thing by a definition [...] is to reject that thing, to render it insipid and superfluous, to annihilate it"?

Now everything is new, and it is clear to me that it makes far more sense not to tell it all, to erase it. In the white shape through the car window, I can already see almost nothing, just the signs that flash by at intervals, their orange letters shouting through the snow: "CAUTION".