dimitri verhulst

Europe is burning, while we casually order another drink. Do we defend our freedoms or our appetite? On the clash of religious fanaticism and freedom, from whatever.

Terror isn't blind, in fact, it has its sights set on what the West has built. Europe shakes and trembles, feels suddenly transported by a revival of religious fanaticism back to an age that seemed to have been put to bed forever.

Did we feed those monsters ourselves? The urgent need for answers and solutions meets no response. Despite all that impotence we can perhaps reply to the horror by attacking with artistic beauty, attacking with literature. Let the ink flow, because there too danger threatens.

Dimitri Verhulst (1972) has emerged as one of the great European writers of the day. He has published 19 books, his work has been filmed and adapted for the stage and has come out in 25 countries. Many of his books have won literary prizes, including the Gouden Uil Audience Prize and the Libris Literary Prize. Verhulst writes nov-

els, stories, novellas, poetry and plays.

His classic, *The Misfortunates*, sold 400,000 copies; 732,000 copies of his 2015 Book Week gift *De zomer hou je ook niet tegen* found their way to his readers. The autumn of 2016 sees the publication of *Het leven gezien van beneden* and *Spoo Pee Doo*, two books both motivated by the same sense of urgency. In the spring of 2017, Verhulst presents the new VPRO travel series featuring key locations relating to European culture, *Made in Europe*.

Also by Dimitri Verhulst:

Christ's Entry into Brussels

Madame Verona Comes Down the Hill

Problemski Hotel

The Misfortunates

The Latecomer

DIMITRI VERHULST

Spoo Pee Doo

Translated by Sam A. Herman

Uitgeverij Atlas Contact Amsterdam/Antwerpen

Copyright © 2016 Dimitri Verhulst Designed by Bart Desnerck Interior book design Suzan Beijer She says, I probably won't see you before breakfast?, and you answer that you don't imagine that it'll be late this evening because you're tired, which is true, and you have a feeling that you won't see many people you know, that it's the end of the month and most people are low on cash so they have to cut down on going out. People have been celebrating holidays, Saint Hippolytus, Saint Hula-Hoop, barbeques, street parties and all that sort of thing, they've had plenty to eat and more than enough to drink, no one's really in the mood, and anyway the end of the year is just around the corner, and then they'll have to stuff themselves again, pralines and ethi-

cally fried duck liver and assorted calorie bombs, the end of the year when the income tax forms land on the doormat with a heavy thud. You manage to scrape so many reasons together why you won't be late, but the question is whether you believe it yourself. She clearly doesn't believe a word of it. Sure, Dirk just sent a text to say that Lee was back in the country and staying with him for the weekend, and that they're sitting outside at The Marree Man, of course, The Marree Man, if Dirk is at a café then ten to one it's at The Marree Man, and he was wondering whether you fancied a drink. Your girlfriend doesn't know Lee but that doesn't really matter, no one remembers Lee. That's the way it goes, life, even for icons. And that's fine. In the end, darkness settles over everyone and everything. Lee Who? The guy who exhibited his drawings last year at that gallery on Ajuinlei, when the show opened five people and a stray dog turned up. Yes. Lee. Him. She remembers, she thought those drawings were awful. Fine, you don't think you won't be back until morning. One drink, maybe two, five at most, and then home. But she knows morning will come and that your side of the bed will still be cold.

That just as she's waking up you'll be slipping a couple of coins into the fist of some burly bouncer as you step out of the bar, surprised that it's already light. Your stomach will scream at you for something oily, and ignoring that the night is irrevocably over and all the chip shops are shut, vou'll wander the streets in search of fries and a dollop of mayonnaise and a hot dog. Julien's will be closed, and if the shutters are drawn at Julien's chippy you can be sure there's not another hot dog to be had in the city, the turn of Julien's key has all the accuracy of an atomic clock, the night comes to a grateful end in his rubbish bin full of chip bags and plastic forks. But even then you'll carry on obstinately to Thingummy, whose name escapes you, the proud owner of the vilest chip shop in the country, namely the Vleeshuis. The man's hygiene is so abominable he probably fries his spuds in the grease from his own armpits, and his fries are, guess what, absolutely inedible, even the pigeons refuse to drill their beaks into the chips that drop from his customers' drunken mouths, yet needs must and mankind is capable of the strangest extremes, and chips from Thingummy are just one of those things. But even

Thingummy will be shut, and growling and grumbling you'll trot home hungrily, passing a whole assortment of people staring at you disapprovingly out of their successful lives because you, well yes why, you don't really know why. Naturally you'll imagine that your footwork is well under control. And no one can tell that you've soaked up a bucketful of gin. You think. And it's lucky you live in the centre of town, within walking distance of everything, because it would be entirely in character for you to believe that your mind is completely clear, clear for thought and clear for action, and entirely capable of driving a car. And even though it may be good for the species that every now and then someone gets run over, you're happy the task doesn't fall to you. It doesn't bear thinking about. In fact it's usually the wrong people who get run over, there's not a scrap of justice in a car wheel. So you carry straight on, at least you think so. While the prim and proper of the world stare disdainfully, you can't fool them, they can tell from three miles off that you haven't been anywhere near your pyjamas all night. In your head, the beat still thumps away relentlessly, music by Usz, songs like Tukka

Yoots Riddim, You Can't Hold Me Down, and, of course, of course, Cantaloop, that marvellous homage to the incomparable Herbie Hancock. You'd be dancing through the streets if it didn't leave you feeling guilty towards all those people with their successful lives, a feeling they want you to have because for them the day has already started in earnest, they have work to do, children to raise, that too, and shopping to do, shoes to try on, coupons to cut out and to spend, and because you and your rubbery legs and your watery eyes are a painful reminder to them that there's an alternative to all that happiness of theirs. And so you'll get home, pale from hunger and a dryness already tickling your throat. Your girlfriend will be awake, has been for a while already, the smell of fresh toast gone from the kitchen, a load of clean laundry already hanging out to dry, and she'll say, It wasn't going to be a late night, or did I miss something? No man has an answer to a question like that. Yes, it wasn't going to be a late night, sorry. You'll want to fry yourself an omelette. Eggs laid by philanthropic hens for midnight ravens. Eggs absorb the alcohol-induced toxins in the body although there's the disadvantage that they burden the already overburdened liver. Canned tuna is another excellent post-alcoholic food. But tuna are struggling in the wild. Things aren't looking good for tuna, either. So you don't buy tuna anymore, your own piddling contribution to mother nature. Soap for your conscience. And when you open the fridge you'll find there are no eggs left in the house. No soft drinks either. Because it never rains but it pours. A glass of grapefruit juice would have been perfect, it would have eased your dehydrated brain. You had all night to drink grapefruit juice, till you burst, but you never ordered a single glass. So you'll go to bed hungry and thirsty. You'll wish you had something nice to say to your girlfriend, words that would express your infinite love for her, words to comfort her and to reassure, because she fears the worst for you. It all seems to be going wrong, a blind bat could see that. Only last week Emmy warned you to watch out you didn't end up like Luke, that one day they would find you in the morning, dead, the light switched off, without a sound, without a noise, no theatre, no drama, just dead. Your organs won't keep cleaning your insides indefinitely, they get tired. You were talking

about death, because that's what every conversation eventually comes round to, everything leads there, not to Rome, like some people say, but to death, and you said that you didn't want to be cremated when it was your clock's turn to stop ticking. Cremation was too quick for you. You're a laggard, and you want to decompose at leisure, lying comfortably on your back, rotting away peacefully. And she had added that you had probably already started to decompose. So you see, people have begun to notice your wild lifestyle. You hardly eat, which is not necessarily a bad thing, you never were a big eater, the skinniest beanpole in your class, year after year, but the combination is lethal when you also hit the bottle and you smoke. You cling to your cigarettes as if they were oxygen tanks. No, no one will tell you straight to your face that you have a drinking problem. Actually, during the day you only drink coffee. You wouldn't even be able to drink alcohol. during the day. But in the evening, lately there's always some reason to raise a glass, a birthday here, an exhibition opening there, a party somewhere else, and then there's no stopping you. An unguided missile. You don't have a drinking problem, keep repeating that mantra to yourself, old boy. No drinking problem. None. But you're a hair's breadth away. Say something to that beautiful girlfriend of yours. Everything's fine. It won't become a habit. You won't drink tomorrow. The top's back on the bottle. And you've had enough of those cigarettes too. She even more. Because your breath stinks, your mouth is like a cemetery full of dead worms, your gob tastes of wet rags and even wetter mud, it's no fun having to kiss you. Except maybe for a non-smoker. Which she's not. She hears you coughing and clearing your throat every morning. She tolerates your stained fingers inside her when you make love. And she fears, with reason, that you'll be decomposing peacefully on your back faster than you think. That rattling in your rib cage may well be cancer. It's possible. Could be. But you don't go to the doctor. Doctors are for minor symptoms, not for diseases. There's an acupuncturist in town who studied in China, where acupuncture isn't called acupuncture, it's pinyin. For a steep fee which isn't covered by insurance, the guy will stick a couple of titanium needles in your ear and your desire for nicotine instantly evaporates. Abracadabra. You're going to see that guy. Soon. Promised. And maybe he can pinyin his needles in some other bit of your anatomy, to stop that constant drinking of yours. Say it. And then crawl into bed, on her side which is still a little bit warm and smells of her. Oh my god, you love her so, yet you're gambling her away like nothing.

probably won't see you before breakfast, she says, she's saying it rather than asking, and you reply as you so often have, in all honesty. What's this wanderlust, why do you have to go out again? Don't say that there are so many different places and you want to have gone to them all. Most of humanity is hardly worth the snot up their nose, you rarely derive any pleasure from meeting specimens of your own kind. Dogs, you can get on with them. And cats too, actually. But without drink, most people are hard to bear, teetotallers know that all too well, they radiate tedium with a passion. And that'll be the joke later at the bar, that you'll be sitting there with a load of other

people who are basically also drowning their misanthropy in drink. All the misanthropes happily together. There are thousands of reasons to stay home. To have that one drink with Dirk and Lee and then come straight back. Look at that girl, look at that woman, she's the most beautiful child in the universe and by some miracle she is headover-heels in love with you. How often have you looked at her and thought, How did I do that, how did I manage to persuade that girl to fall in love with me? It would be so easy to stay at home tonight. You could play scrabble, for example, it's been a long time now you think of it, determined to affectionately and humiliatingly demolish her. It would have to be more than a triple word bonus, it would have to be a triple word bonus with top letters. With an x or a q or a z. Or at least two of those letters in the same word. Bezique. Equinox. Quetzal. And then throw in a j: jukebox. Or read, sitting together on the sofa. When one chuckles the other asking why. Reading passages to each other. Or watch a film, by Ettore Scola. Or Pasolini, and then go upstairs, hot as mustard, and make love. Or you could lie on the sofa listening adoringly as she plays Chopin. After all

you still love her, really, it comes in waves, but when she plays Chopin you don't know what to do with yourself. Then you might do something stupid like go over to the piano yourself. You can't really play, but you like to try. Much of the misery in this world is down to people who want to do stuff they are completely incapable of doing. And that's you at the piano, you play like a Muppet, pling-pling-plong, I fell into the ocean, plong, when you became my wife, plong, I gave it all against the sea, pling, to have a better life... Until, full of self-loathing having made the planet a good deal more ugly for the duration of your song, you slam the keyboard cover shut. And she's angry because you're angry with yourself. She thinks you're talented, unbelievable, and accuses you of false modesty. If only she knew. Best case scenario, vou're semi-talented, and that's even worse than being untalented. The self-contempt of the first lot is all the greater. A discussion, not even a fight, which has become part of your standard repertoire with her. So what? What else could you do? You could put a few blocks of wood in that superb stove of yours, a Free Flow, industrial, ruttish design, the finest stoves around, check it out, and look, just watch, stare in contemplation, at the flames, the glowing embers. There's no better TV than a fireplace. Few things are as relaxing as watching goldfish or a fire. All kinds of possibilities and none of them unpleasant, yet you're standing by the mirror for a quick shave, using a shaver again these days, because you've had enough of messing about with mousses and razors, and because someone just gave you a shaver, for your birthday, forty-something-or-other. A Philips, because the generous giver knew that the masculine gender is divided into two types: those who shave with a Braun, and those who swear by Philips. For him, you belong to the latter. He's bought his share of shavers, he should know, his intuition when it comes to the world of depilation is finely tuned. It means little to you, Philips or Braun, you're happy just to have the shaver, it shaves easily and cleanly, bloody chins are a thing of the past. A dash of aftershave. Never overdo the aftershave. And there you are. Perfume should be employed in minimal amounts so that it's hardly noticeable, barely suspected. You think of asking your girlfriend whether you look alright, but you swallow your words. Who are you supposed

to be looking good for anyway? And you're not going to be out for long. One drink with Dirk and Lee and then home. As you said. And you meant it. Jeans, shirt, sneakers. That will do. Neat and simple. Question is, whether it'll rain, which determines your choice of coat. So take a coat that's okay in the rain, then it won't rain, that's how it works. See you soon, you tell your girlfriend. See you tomorrow, she replies. She knows all about Leonardo who runs The Marree Man, an inveterate vodka buff, always ready to share one of his amazing bottles. With a bit of luck he'll have a bottle of Pan Tadeusz. Isn't that something: a vodka named after a poem! It's a sorry culture that can't manage to connect its beverages with its literature. The Poles, big readers, big drinkers, there's a logic in that combination, don't ask what, but the Poles, that's what you're trying to say, the Poles get it. They are the last hope of a Europe descending into illiteracy! In their taverns they imbibe spiritual succour named after epic verse, and quote with a tongue ever looser from the celebrated lines of Adam Mickiewickz's magnum opus: Oh, my country... You are like good health... I never realised your true worth until now, now

that I have lost you... But Leonardo won't be there, dear, you can sense it, like a barometer, from the direction of the wind, from your heartbeat, and not a verse of Pan Tadeusz will escape your lips. So, see you soon. Oh, the burst of fresh air when you suddenly find yourself outside. All day long you were sat indoors, for no reason, but with even less reason to venture outside. That fresh breeze does you good, and the first people you meet are in excellent spirits. There's real effort in that hello. A girl on a bike is cycling against the traffic, she's wearing headphones, and singing, not even off-key. You don't have headphones, never did in fact, for you the noise of the street is sacred, but if you did then they would have been playing Cannonball Adderley. Jive Samba. Or, a bit more lively, My Definition Of A Boombastic Jazz Style by Dream Warriors. And then hopefully it would rain and

there would be puddles to jump in. First port of call: the late-night shop for some of their best smokes. The Pakistani, at least you assume the lady is Pakistani, she recognises you and always offers you a broad smile as you walk in. Her business thrives with your custom. Strange really, this Asian people's nocturnal specialisation. You might expect it of Scandinavians, they're used to living in the dark, their blind and visually impaired are envied for their permanent celebration of the midwinter feast, while instead of being able to enjoy the benefits of their generous welfare state, in that cold northern clime the blind have to pay an extra tax on their frivolous handicap. Night shops, first aid in emergencies, where all the essentials are always in stock: crisps, drink, fags, dog food and sanitary towels, the pillars of Western civilisation. It's busy in the shop, young people have clearly decided en masse to get drunk as cheaply as possible tonight, and why not, they are inspecting the various labels on the headache wines. The local dosser is back again, stinking of the urine he would have pissed against someone's wall if he had not been caught short. Morsels of food dangle in his beard, suggesting that he must

have begged enough today to be able to invest in something more than the obligatory cans of beer. He takes five cans of Cara from the cooler, the brand the down and out drink, and takes far too long to pay. His trousers are always slipping down, after all poverty weighs heavy. The luxury of a banknote eludes him; the poor blighter has to make do with the pennies he collects in his bowl. Eventually he leaves. Only for a while though, because when his cans are empty and pissed in his pants or against someone's wall he'll be back for a new supply. He has gone, but his piss odour lingers. You order three packets of Davidoff. That's what you call a positive attitude to life: three packets straight off and into the night without a care. Providence: divine benevolence, the gift of the Almighty bestowing wisdom and love to enable all creatures to attain their ultimate goal. Amen. Of course you won't be smoking it all yourself, and certainly not tonight, even though you smoke like a chimney, but three packets a day is beyond even you, sorry. For you it's natural, though you may be the only person in this not necessarily unpleasant galaxy, who likes to share their cigarettes. Not with bums and tramps, but with occasional smokers who never buy a packet for themselves because it isn't in their nature to be able to deal with the close proximity of the cancer stick. Every now and then, the grand seigniors among the occasional smokers buy you a packet, to even up the balance, or treat you to a frothy brew. They have manners. Even though they may say, Oh, you smoke Davidoff?, Aren't those faggot fags with that gay white filter? While they're all too glad to scorch their lungs to oblivion with smoke from your faggot fags. And you're delighted to offer a cigarette to a smoker who suddenly finds their supply exhausted. In short, you're a champion of solidarity among smokers. We have to help each other down the slippery slope; it's no fun being alone. Goodbye, lady from Pakistan in the green sari, with the gold nose ring, with the decoratively painted hands and the red ochre powder bindi on the forehead, until the next time. And as soon as you leave the shop you tear open the packet and put the first of many Davidoffs between your lips. You'll stop one of these days, yes, it's been long enough, you've been smoking for thirty years, all the tar in your lungs would probably fill a hundred of those old-fashioned ink pots, enough to write all of Shakespeare's works, Ophelia's bloated body in the river, King Lear's reconciliation with his daughter, If you have poison for me I will drink it, everything, yes, yes, you'll stop soon, you have to, you're becoming a hypochondriac, you have visions of yourself suffocating in a pathetic hospital bed, surrounded by doctors telling you it's your own fault, who consider pity entirely misplaced and have no sympathy for your squeamish pleas for euthanasia... You'll stop soon, promised, but not tonight. And so, smoking like a chimney in a child's drawing and one hand in your trouser pocket, you walk along the old canal, though it's not the guickest route. But you love the tranguil atmosphere, the absence of restaurants and shoe shops keeps the crowds away. The only tourists who venture here come on boats, frozen to the bone this time of year. What the guides rattle off is of no interest to them, no need, as far as they're concerned, to drag the historical figure of Mary of Burgundy back from obscurity. With their phones they take photos which they'll post on Facebook this evening; by the time they reach this stretch of water they're bored to distraction and

desperate for a cup of hot chocolate or longing to scoff themselves silly with what their guide has assured them is a local speciality. The water is calming, the Lodewijk Van Male bridge fills you with joy, like the ruins of the soap factories and the cotton mills. The willows along the bank: old women who lean over with the slightly affected grace of a young girl to wash their long hair in the tranquil water. You are no monogamous lover of this town, your hometown you could say, because that is what it has become, a town with water, a town with trams. You often think about moving, to another town with water and trams, because that's crucial, a town has no right to exist without trams or a river, and there you could take similar walks. Naturally, you've flirted with a few towns, you'll never feel truly at home anywhere, your thoughts follow a more nomadic train, but whenever you walk over these cobblestones you are overcome by a profound satisfaction with your place in the atlas, your whole being is in unison with your surroundings. The art of geography. Hear how the ducks quack in agreement.

Sprechen Sie Deutsch? Two young lasses, though actually, probably already well into their twenties, who have not yet demeaned themselves with the acquisition of a selfie stick, wonder if you would be good enough to take their photo. Well yes, Deutsch sprechen Sie, as long as the conversation isn't about epistemology you can make yourself understood, assuming you don't have to bother declining the cases correctly, and you're allowed a mistake or two with the genders of nouns. Juggling modal auxiliaries is of secondary importance when taking photos. Dürfen, können, mögen, müssen, you don't even need to ask which button to press, a phone camera isn't a cockpit.

The women want the castle to be in the background, you figured that already. The castle, really a citadel, surrounded by a quiet moat. Horizontal or vertical? And they chuckle. Vertical is fine once in a while, yes. They pose, thumbs up, their cheerful smiles contrasting with the drabness of the weather. As long as they don't expect you to ask them to say cheese. Where from in Germany? Okay, Swiss. Okay, Bern. Great. Fabian Cancellara is from Bern too. Fabian, nein? Berühmte Radfahrer. Und Paul Klee. Blah blah. They unfold a large map of the town in front of you and ask if you could show them where they are now. The museum of modern art is what they are looking for, and suddenly you like them a lot more, even though there isn't much to see there, a couple of pots and pans scattered on the floor, five walls randomly spattered with paint and an installation of video stills of peeled bananas, modern art in other words, although you don't wish to be a spoilsport so you explain that they sometimes host impressive exhibitions, only not now, unfortunately. They should have been here last month, there was an extraordinary show then, but now, too bad. Anyway, look at the time, there's hardly

any point going to the museum, the wardens will be watching the clock in anticipation, they have their coats at the ready, it's almost closing time. Danke schön! Then they want to know if you have any tips for them, you're from around here, aren't you? Somewhere fun for the evening, where they can dance, let their hair down. There are days when you would grab at a chance like this and say Come with me if you like, I was thinking of stepping out into the world this evening, just for a laugh, without coming on to them, just because it's wonderful to go out on the town and while away the hours of general oblivion with complete strangers, and you reckon that these two women would have taken you up on your offer, although they're young, you could have been their father, and if not, maybe their uncle. Anyway, two Swiss mademoiselles, best friends for ever, together on a city trip. A wild weekend, just the two of them. Of course they have sweethearts back home, it would be odd if they didn't, but that's not something these two shepherdesses are thinking about right now. It's party time. But this wasn't going to be a late night, lucky you reminded yourself in time, just a couple of drinks with

Lee and Dirk and then you'll throw in the towel. So you mark a few places with an x on the map, places you think they could have fun tonight. No need to worry about them, they're not exactly ugly, they don't need anyone to look after them and least of all you. They'll get drunk and brush their mountain-village ass against some guy on the dance floor. Tomorrow morning they'll wake up in surprise amid the rumpled sheets in a room that smells of cat litter and unfold their map of the town in search of their hotel, where they'll arrive far too late to enjoy the overpriced breakfast they paid for in advance. That's how these things go, and there's nothing wrong with that. Before you know it they'll be mothers, you can't condemn young women to marriage in a state of frustration. Give them at least the brief illusion of an exciting life. Danke schön, es ist nichts, have einen wunderschönen Abend oder min oder mehr something. You walk on. The two cuberdon vendors have yet to close. Their stalls are no more than ten metres apart and they have been locked in a ridiculous rivalry for years. One claims to sell the best cuberdons in the world, the only real cuberdons, crisp and crunchy on the outside and

sweet and gelatinous inside, while his rival claims to sell the best cuberdons in the street. They call out to their customers, each louder than the other. cuberdons, cuberdons, chapeau de curé, five euros a bag, after which the other yodels cuberdons, cuberdons, toepeneuzen, obviously fluent in both languages, the finest top quality sweets, four-anda-half euros a bag. They are ready to run each other into the ground, mutually assured destruction, small business idiots. If one has the energy to keep his stall open another hour, the other will summon the strength to keep his stall open another two hours. If need be they'll carry on until they both drop dead from exhaustion, finally burying the hatchet at the cemetery, their unmourned graves side-by-side, here lies the man who sold the best cuberdons on the planet, but as long as their hearts still pump blood and their spots are full of puss they are ever ready to do battle, obsessed by the notion of making and selling the ultimate cuberdon. No need to shout themselves hoarse for you though; you can't stand cuberdons, a cone of glucose syrup, sticky, far too sweet. And they know you, these two gents have seen you saunter past their stalls many a time and have

long since stopped trying to tempt you. They say nothing as you pass, not even hello. There's no point to hello unless it brings in some money. hough most stomachs are still sleeping, the restaurant terraces are gradually beginning to fill. Chefs are the new rock 'n' roll stars, young hombres no longer dream that one day they'll perform at Glastonbury Festival, it's not the guitar but the wooden spoon that lures, a Michelin star is what they want, a positive review in the Gault&Millau restaurant guide. Culinary triumph. And there's a crisis, as the homeless and the jobless and the everything-elseless will affirm, rents are soaring, consumer confidence is in the doldrums, the index is oscillating wildly, but crisis or not, try to find a table on a whim at around eight and there'll be nothing available, all the eateries are booked

solid, to the proprietor's chagrin of course. Perhaps, later, at around ten o'clock there may be a table, because there's always someone who cancels at the last moment, those who have the decency to cancel that is, because vast boorish majorities never bother to cancel, they just don't turn up, so their table remains needlessly empty, for an hour at least, imagine the loss that involves, the bastards have no idea about the cost of staff these days, or the price of the water in the washing-up basin, not to mention the taxman, that sponge. Much later tonight you should be able to eat something, with any luck, and on condition they haven't run out of ingredients; because here they only use fresh produce: fish that were still raising a family this very morning, with plans to take the youngsters on a swim to the other end of the sea, now lie on the plate tasty as can be beside slivers of truffle and a shallot, beautifully filleted. In the early evening you can also tuck in, true, that usually works. But those who want to eat out around the time that people generally eat out should sit down with their phone and their diary. The first glasses of cava are fizzing on the tables, oysters rest snottily and naked on their bed of ice. Someone comments that Gadogado is a remarkably nutritious salad leaf; indeed, it's the truism of the day. Gadogado is a remarkably nutritious salad leaf, there's not much chance you'll have to use this sentence ever in your life, but you'd like to give it a try. What time is it? Oh, there's still time for a drink before The Marree Man, Lee and Dirk won't have arrived yet, and you make the royal decision to find a seat at a table outside De Kleine Rokade, for old time's sake, because De Kleine Rokade is not what it used to be, not by a long chalk. Once an icon among bars, let's give credit where credit is due. The first bar in town to admit blacks, when politically correct moralists had yet to object to the term negro, and since these exotic customers apparently had a far better sense of rhythm, just ask the women they slept with, screwing is rhythm, and rhythm is screwing, never go to bed, dear children, with someone who suffers from amusia or aprosodia, anyway, De Kleine Rokade soon emerged as the town's top jazz café, with a case full of albums to make anyone even slightly moved by the magic of the 331/2 rpm record giddy. You were a smooth-faced youngster when you first crossed the threshold and it was in this temple that you heard many essential recordings for the first time: The Sidewinder by Lee Morgan, Oliver Nelson with The Blues and the Abstract Truth, the whole kit and caboodle. Thursday night gigs were anticipated events. And as the bar's name suggested, it was also a place to play chess. You left your passport as a deposit for a board, the loser bought the winner a drink. That's how it was. Traditionally, Hungarians play chess in the swimming pool and let's hope it gives them pleasure, you prefer chess in a café. You were never an expert, a Swedish social-psychologist, whose name escapes you, once opined that a person needed ten thousand hours of experience before they could call themselves an expert. Half of Sweden's male population is called Anders Ericsson, the other half is called Eric Andersson, let's suppose that the man who thought up the ten-thousand-hour theory was called Anders, inasmuch as it is of any importance, because the theory is quite ridiculous in itself. What you mean to say is that you have yet to play ten thousand hours of chess, and it remains to be seen whether you'll ever be considered an expert in anything. Ten thousand hours

of smoking, ten thousand hours of drinking coffee, ten thousand hours of staring dreamily from the window, the three can easily be done together. Ten thousand hours of writing and never being satisfied. Two hundred and eighty thousand plus a few hours as an orphan. And you won't be playing chess now either, that's not what you came for. Anyway: who still plays chess these days? Chess: the ultimate form of pigeon holding. De Kleine Rokade is a pale shadow of its former self, the smoking ban destroyed the bar. Jazz needs nicotine. Chess needs nicotine. The bar is empty, the brown furniture looks antique, John Coltrane is spinning on the turntable, at least there's that, but more like an abandoned merry-go-round. Like a stupefied circus pony that no one wants to comb. The few customers are sitting outside, around the heaters, where they can still smoke. For you, a coffee. Look at that, what strength of character, the carillon has ushered in the hour of the aperitif and still you insist on coffee. You can't possibly have a problem with alcohol, everything is fine old chap, keep muttering the mantra. And the coffee at De Kleine Rokade isn't even worth drinking. Far too watery. These days it's not waiters who serve coffee, it's baristas. To get a cup of black gold, you need a doctorate in advanced coffeeology. Would you like lightly-roasted beans or espresso, Sumatran or Ethiopian? Do you prefer single origin or single bush? Bloody hell, you have been drinking coffee all your life, like a salmon drinks water, but this frivolous rubbish doesn't interest you one bit. Just put the jug of caffeine on the table, so what if that makes you the biggest cultural barbarian in the time zone. At De Kleine Rokade there's only one sort of coffee, namely coffee, no affogato, no macchiato, but ordinary everyday coffee like your grandmother used to make, dribbled through a filter, to the satisfaction of the uncultivated olfactory organs of her offspring, and if it tastes a little off you can always add a splash of milk, ordinary milk, from cows without documented pedigree, not frothed or steamed either, just poured from a bottle, you could even throw in a sugar cube. And then dunk a ginger biscuit in your mug, dunk, dunk, dunk, dunk, until you dunk it once too often and it ends up swimming like wet diarrhoea in your cup. Delicious. No, not for you the touch of hazelnut or toast, no tomato, no cherry. Coffee. The source of life itself. Before the first plants and animals crawled onto dry land, the earliest life forms wriggled about in a puddle of coffee. No beginning was ever better. On an entirely different level than that ten thousand hour theory. Coffee, oh, coffee. And a cigarette.

What if you gave Snerkie a call? Might be construed as malice aforethought, because calling Snerkie is tantamount to admitting that your plan to return home at a respectable hour is doomed, or at least to be back early enough to crawl under the duvet beside your lover. Assuming he answers, calling Snerkie means that he'll ask where you are and he won't be able to resist that siren call to come and join you. He needs as little sunlight as you; he only gets up when it's twilight. A night out with Snerkie is a party, always has been. You're the perfect team for a night on the town, extra uterine photophobic twins. Nocturnal blooms that close when the crocus

opens. And what could be more enjoyable than to sit outside a café and chat with your best mate on the phone, sipping weak coffee, dragging on a Davidoff? Hey Snerkie, how's it going? Everything's going excellently for Snerkie, or at least for the most part, things could be better, the wife is out working tonight, he's at home with the kids, no way to escape. He's chalked up all the points he needs, he has garnered more than enough goodwill for his wife to let him off the leash, that's not the problem, it's just that he's tied hand and foot with all this task-sharing in the house. On top of that, there's the dog, which had been rattling like a blocked coffee percolator for years, Fons was the animal's name, after Fons De Wolf, a racing cyclist, and not a bad one at that, so Fons had died, suddenly, a coronary or something, and the kids are in mourning although he, their father, had been certain all this time that his sons had cared about as much as he did for the dog. No, he would have liked nothing better than to push the boat out tonight, he's ready for a break, to be honest, especially after this disastrous month at work, hardly any orders coming in, tough times for the self-employed, and after having revamped a whole

bloody playground, as a favour, a volunteer, at the school where his brats are learning the three R's. What a joke, parent participation. His back is a mess, completely screwed, a bath would be perfect but he doesn't dare take one for fear he won't be able to get out of the tub. He's looking forward to raising a glass one of these days soon, but for the moment he'll stay at home and drown himself in jealousy. No need to be jealous, Snerkie, you won't be out late tonight anyway, you won't be watching the crocuses open, which he finds hard to believe, even if there aren't any crocuses this time of year, but look, one day soon you'll both put on your shiny shoes and stand and piss together under the open sky, it's a deal. It was good to hear Snerkie's voice. Love dies, but friendship survives. Write that one down. So you order another coffee, because the first was rather weak, and you watch what's going on in the square from your delightful observation post. It's Friday, the thirteenth in fact, a day that's supposedly unlucky because they once nailed a son of god to a piece of wood when the almanacs recorded the same conjunction of dates, only the young people you see walking about, cheerfully, with booksacks

which seem to have lost all weight, have clearly dispensed with that superstition. Friday, freedom. They just kissed their sweethearts, they're invincible, and now they are heading home, to a weekend without maths. They're in a hurry, the final of the song contest is on telly and starting soon, the whole country is rooting for the crooners, bags of crisps and bottles of coke are lined up, it looks set to be another unforgettable television experience. No need to go to bed, and once they're in, no need to get out for anything or anyone. The trams, plastered with adverts for some power company, Less Co₂ Together, pump the city centre dry. Nivea: it's going to be a blue winter. Office staff are transported back to their villas in the suburbs, and even more numerous are those wearing less exclusive brands heading back to the less desirable estates on the outskirts. All share the prospect of the next two days, two golden days when not even the postman will be getting out of bed; no one will have to open their post box in trepidation, no bills, no invoices or final notices will leave the sorting office. No news is good news. Monday morning the crowds will reconverge, looking slightly sadder, for the commuter treadmill. A gypsy wanders toward the café, shouldering a fiddle, but before even a single note can escape that weary instrument the waiter has already chased the violinist away. Here, at the first bar to welcome blacks. But customers leave when beggars arrive, and the customer is always right, no messing with that law. If only the violinist would play something decent, but no, whining Balkan ballads, on a fiddle strung with barbed wire. Someone approaches your table to cadge a cigarette. Of course, with a smile. Gadogado is a remarkably nutritious salad leaf. Sorry? Gado...? No, nothing, you were asking if he needed a light? He has a lighter, thanks anyway. And then he wonders if it's possible that he knows you from somewhere? The cigarette was a ruse, an excuse to start a conversation. Know you from somewhere, well you get around town, this isn't your first coffee at De Kleine Rokade. It isn't the answer he wanted, you look vaguely familiar. Yes, the sad fate of an unremarkable ordinary face, you could be anyone, and no one. Usually no one.

All things must pass, darkness settles over everything and everyone, and so the time to drink coffee draws to a close, however pleasant it may be to sit here lazily, watching the human zoo from your chair. You stroll past the cinema, and although you're not planning to watch a movie tonight the posters entice you with their landscapes, their bodies, naked and otherwise, the actresses who seem only to live on screen, at least you never meet them, not at the baker round the corner anyway. Films that won trophies at major festivals around the world, palms, leopards, calves, lions and bears, even a globe, all made of gold, occasionally silver, that's the way with film prizes.

Oh, how sublime to sit for two hours in the dark, to be swept up in a story, to fall in love, aroused, sad, angry and then later allowing those emotions to sink in at the cinema bar while enjoying a drink and a slither of sausage. You must definitely catch a movie next week, life without cinema is not worth living. But first that drink with Dirk. Which route to take to The Marree Man? Past the bell-tower, the carillon has just begun to chime, to the delight of tourists who never get to hear such a hideous racket back home. Jingle-jangle elevated to world cultural heritage, Apollo's sisters vomiting Olympus all to mud. Bell-tower: bravado! Civic power blaring brazenly. A tower surmounted by a mythical dragon, rivalling every other tower surmounted by an equally mythical god. And a gigantic clock of course, so you can see anywhere in town that time doesn't glide along, it flies, that you're wasting valuable seconds, you're toying with existence, that death is already breathing its fermented fishy breath in your neck. The hands point reproachfully at you, they throw the precise time in your face like a reprimand, you laggard, you no-good, mister etcetera. Everywhere you go you're reminded that

the worms which will someday consume you may already have been born. The worm, the scarab, the skin beetle. All these towers toll for you, ding dong. They even include clocks in microwaves these days, and espresso machines. Such sadism. For a brief span we thrash about in the fourth dimension, but not for long, so use your time well, slaves of the pendulum. Past Eendenpoel the butcher, the best meat in the region. They say. And it's reasonable to assume. His superb shop window with severed, open carcases. Nothing fussy about that man, the cow also has its brief span on earth, and to eat you must kill, he wears his blood-soaked apron with pride. Today we have rubber boots and electricity, but lose your connection with cro-magnon and you lose your humanity. The taste of intestines, as basic as the beauty of a painted odalisque. Will he have veal sweetbreads in stock? You could order them, cleaned, poached in bouillon, membrane and bumps removed, all you have to do is to cook them and pop them in your cakehole. If you order them now you'll have them tomorrow. The very idea. You can feel the gland melting on your tongue. A morsel of meat full of vitamin C, the

perfect vegetable substitute. But the line at the counter is just a tad too long. Friday, you know. Friends invited, bottles of wine decanted, Domaine de Chevalier, something special is called for, something out of the ordinary. Instead of the usual supermarket trash, tonight a bit of quality from Eendenpoel. And they're right after all. But you really don't feel like waiting in line, so onward and along. The accordionist on the square is waiting until the piercing chime of the bells subsides; soon he'll pick up his concertina and take over from them with his regular repertoire, melodies that must have originated in melancholy places, though the sun shines there every day and the cucumber won't ripen for love or money, but no one will pay him any attention, his cap will remain empty. They have no feeling for music, the philistines, and still call his instrument the poor man's piano. Squeezebox, another term, perhaps a little more logical. They hear one note from the accordion and they can already smell the chicory rolled in bacon, and Sundays with gran nan when they were kids. They think of the lifts in those stereotypical hotels, the muzaked evergreens designed to prepare the guests mentally for the

iacuzzi. Lord of sweeties and simpletons, forgive them for they know not what they do, their cold souls have never warmed to a sound. You grab a few coins from your pocket and throw them into the musician's cap. You've made someone happy, and you've reduced the chance that your washing machine will be ruined again because a few coins got into the drum. Double whammy. The accordionist eyes you, confused: just as he stops playing he starts to make money. But look, the bell ringer is calling it a day, the church owls that haven't gone deaf yet and still live in the tower sigh in relief. And down here, where the wingless creatures are forced to dwell, someone begins anew and pulls out the nine stops of his sublime instrument. Besame mucho.

You're almost there, just the square with the fountain left to cross. There was a café there once, where you could sit outside, De Fabels, a linguistic quip, next to the fountain, Jean de la Fontaine, hahahaha, and maybe once or twice there was someone who knew who Jean de la Fontaine was and thought of the story of the singing grasshopper, reprimanded by the hard-working, industrious, capitalist ant. Moral of the story: Whoever tries to live from art is crazy; often he'll have nothing and go hungry. Whatever. The ant has won the day on that square, the bar is now a clothes shop, number eighty-and-something in the town, labels for those who need to buy their

status, made where people shit curry and children in textile caverns sop their hands in carcinogenic dves. Not a singing grasshopper to be heard. Although. For some reason this square has become a launch pad for spotty idealists who grab hold of you and beg to borrow a minute of your time, while they actually already stole that minute the moment they asked their question, which they then follow up with a detailed account of the appalling conditions in which turkeys live in poultry farms, passionately, as if they had been a turkey in a previous existence, and had resolved as they approached the chopping block to return as an animal activist, and to shove a petition under your nose in the belief that a signature would pave the way towards justice, although the signatures that really matter in the world, the signatures that actually get results are those appended to orders. invoices, contracts, whatever. Anyway, you have a soft spot for the young fellows. Singing grasshoppers. Chirping sparrows. Fnfnffing rabbits. What is it they say? If you're not left wing when you're twenty you don't have a heart; if you're still left wing when you're fifty you don't have a brain? From the boutique of proverbs. A saying for on a wall tile, probably thought up by someone in their fifties who had forgotten that he didn't have a pot to piss in when he was young, and now sits brooding on his investments, cogitating on the purchase of a new car for his new girlfriend. Or was it Oscar Wilde after all? Well. Anyway, there's another one of them, dressed in white, the colour of innocence, the colour of colourlessness, of wallpaper glue. Have a guess, go on, what wrong do you think the owner of that smooth chin wants to put right? Are we felling too many trees? Is the Turkish president acting like a tyrant, should he be booted off his throne? You'll find out soon enough, look, he wants to know if he can have a minute of your time. Life's too short to throw away minutes for no reason, you don't want to end up on your deathbed and think back to that one minute vou wasted listening to some complaint about whatever. In one hand you notice he's holding a pile of direct debit forms, ha. Of course you want a better world, but not if it costs you money. You pay your taxes, my friend. You pay so much social security it's making you feel socially insecure. Let him take his case to the people who are milking you dry, the rulers of the

earth! Let the government do its job! Citizens shouldn't have to contribute from their own pocket to keep research into multiple sclerosis going! If he thought a little before going into the voting booth he wouldn't have to stand here now collecting for some good cause! The town is full of scroungers for a better world free of disease and injustice; if you gave each one a few cents you'd be sleeping in a cardboard box tonight. And how would that improve the world? But you keep your acerbic observations to yourself, after all: without naiveté there would be no beauty, no love, no nothing. And so you say you're in a hurry, which isn't even a lie. Because you are in a hurry, to drink, to chat, to smoke, to breathe in the first evening of the weekend sitting outside The Marree Man. To be together with friends, the very essence of a better world. Five hundred metres still separates you from good cheer. Come, a cigarette, it makes walking easier. The light beckons, you're smiling and the world smiles with you. In all sincerity you wish the young man success with his philanthropic quest.

You see him sitting there from a distance, Dirk, warmly attired as always, being susceptible to colds and sniffles, his collar up, but his eyes bright, having polished off his first Trappist. He's in his regular place outside the café, the best booth, from which to survey the whole street, the comings and goings of customers and passers-by, watching the young women, how they parade, how they delight in their vanity and ignore the eyes that ogle them, clippety-clop, clippety-clop. You notice that he has already lit a cigar, a colossal brown corona, Puerto Rican merchandise, which you can puff on for an hour at least. Since he stopped poisoning himself with cigarettes, he

has treated himself to a cigar a day, an expensive one. It'll kill him too of course, but he'll suffer with far more style. You have to admit that somehow you envy him, the ritual, lighting up that single gasper once a day, the timing. Building up all day, choosing the moment, the meticulous precision of the smoking. Holding off for a whole day with that parejo in your breast pocket, within easy reach. Very tantric. Not your style, you once tried to limit yourself to a quota of five Davidoffs a day, to become an occasional smoker as it were, and the whole business drove you bananas. Because there's occasion to smoke almost every five minutes. Waiting for a tram is an occasion, drinking a cup of coffee is an occasion, having finished eating is an occasion. It's actually a pity you can't light up after living, because what rounds a thing off better than a fag? You don't like cigars, so no need to even consider switching, but you certainly admire it, being able to focus on that single shot of pleasure, the ability to master time, to decide which hour to elevate above the others. Anyway. There's no one sitting next to Dirk, perfect, you can take your place in the gallery to survey humankind and devote your attention to the noble

art of girl-watching. This isn't the ideal season, it's too cold, the skirts and blouses are hidden for now, the off-shoulder shirt, the sleeveless crop top, the viscose dress, the open back, the butterfly sleeves. It requires a bit more fantasy to undress them, which is not necessarily a bad thing. Hello Dirk, hello Lee, everything okay chaps? Something to drink perhaps? Is there any of that divine, amber-coloured beer from Notre Dame Abbey left? Because that's the disadvantage, possibly the only disadvantage of mass secularisation, that there are so few young men these days who are willing to tie a knot in their dick and retire to a cloistered retreat, to turn their back on the corrupt world and dedicate their life to prayer and fermenting ale. Trappist beer has been hard hit by the triumph of profane philosophy. If only Muslims weren't so averse to alcohol, and Sufis could fund their esoteric lifestyle by brewing beer, then we would be swimming in the finest golden lagers and dancing like dervishes every day, yet it isn't to be, it was the prophet Jesus and not the other one who hocus-pocused water into wine and gave dogmatic drinkers a home in an incrementally impotent Catholicism. The Lord is their shepherd,

and He has lost his way. But Dina, the barmaid on duty, she looks a little frisky tonight, you can bet she's got something lined up for later, has some redemptive news for you, the friars at Notre Dame have delivered a crate of your favourite beer, only the one crate mind, which is twenty-four bottles, but there are other bars where the supply is considerably more limited these days. Prohibition looms. It is a deliberate Jesuit plot, an eavesdropper complains, Just when we've managed to shake off our addiction to God they try to trap us in some other way, those papists, and then there are only two pillars left on which to rebuild your faith: sex and alcohol. Tits and beer. It promises as usual to be an evening of profound conversation, light in tone, full of wisdom. There is a new Nietzsche among us. But you weren't planning to stay late tonight, an aperitif, maybe two, possibly five, and then a hop, skip and a jump home, you must, otherwise your liver will go to the union and declare a strike, so the prospect of only twenty-four bottles, for the entire week indeed, for a single café, should not worry you. Look, here comes the beer, with a bowl of nuts, held aloft in Dina's right hand. A sacred moment, the first sip of the day. God, all things wait for You full of hope, all living creatures ask You for drink, You open Your hands and we are satisfied, Amen. Taste: the aromatic hops, the candy, the lactic acid. and, above all, the lemon zest. A perfect beer, a pinnacle of Charistiaan civilisation! Forget Bellini's sculptures that left the nuns soggy in their chafing jute panties, forget the Sistine Chapel, the gold woven into the robes of the Pope, forget the cathedrals, the rose windows, the stained-glass, the paedophiles, the fragrant scent of burning heretics. This here, this beer, with its yeast sediment that sends us earthlings running to the toilet, keeping the world fertilised for future generations of worthless earthlings, is the pedal note of religion. Take another sip, do. And light a cigarette. Delicious.

ey Vannolle, someone suddenly calls you by your surname, surprised, cheerful, it's been a long time since anyone called you Vannolle, at least in that way, a misterless Vannolle, which could only be from the lips of a someone who knew you at school, where all the students called each other by their surname, God knows why. As if it wasn't bad enough that the teachers only used your surname when importing their instructions to you, Five pages for tomorrow Vannolle, Detention Vannolle, Go to the headmaster Vannolle, Wake up Vannolle, Shut up Vannolle, Outside Vannolle! You look straight into a face that vaguely rings a bell, the hint of a half-forgotten past, dredged up

from your memory along with asymptotic notation and all that other supposedly useful knowledge. Two trains pass each other, the first is two hundred metres long and is going at a hundred and seventy-four kilometres per hour, the second is only sixty-eight metres long and is going at a hundred and forty-four kilometres per hour, How much time passes from when the front of the two trains meet to when the two rear-ends part company? It's not a multiple choice question, you lazy lot. That face that's looking at you is from a time when you could still unravel that kind of riddle, unbelievable. It is ravaged by years and divorce, and while it gained wrinkles it lost hair, so it goes and should go, Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras: it is mown, it grows moss, it is grazed upon, attracts pests, begins to decay. But he says, Vannolle, you haven't changed a bit, as if it were a compliment, as if you might still be walking around with that baby face from your schooldays on your neck, You're smoking as much as ever, I see? In the meantime your brain cells are searching through old yellow pages and photo albums, looking for the man's name. You try to place him. Was he the guy who sat in the front on the right,

pointy hair like everyone had in those days, Hawaiian shirt and two stinking armpits? Decoster? De Wilde? Vandamme? Doesn't matter. He says. Gosh what an amazing coincidence to see you here like this, and it is indeed a coincidence. The proper predicate for coincidence: silly! How are you? Oh, oh. And he adds some drivel about how he's been trying to dig up your contact details because soon, in April, there's going to be a class reunion, special edition, a silver foxes edition, because it's twenty-five years since you graduated. Twenty-five years ago that you knew how much time two trains passing each other etcetera. That you fingered your first girlfriend in the municipal park right after the school bell had rung. And all to be celebrated in April. The silver foxes, my goodness. They'll start with a short service in the school chapel, after which there's dinner in the refectory, cold buffet, with cheese and wine, and an opportunity to recall the pranks you devised to survive the school system, teachers are invited too, most of them are retired by now, it's going to be nice. There should be a ban on the use of that word nice. Corporal punishment for those who say it or write it, waterboarding, lashes, electrocution and torture chairs, because nice doesn't exist. To the strappado with those nice people. The idea of sitting beside ghosts from your past sounds repugnant. What for? To compare your lives, to see who succeeded and failed. Because, well, you all sprinted from the same starting block, and all shot off in different directions. Would it do any good, would it make you feel better, to see that those who were most ambitious back then have ended up in the saddest jobs? That the only one to have paid off his mortgage was the biggest loser in the class? Will you then start blathering on about how time marches on inexorably, the children you have fathered who are now squeezing pimples and in their final year at school? Silver foxes. Oh and look, Vandenabeele is still with the same girl he used to slobber over in the alleyway outside the shoe shop, she's still as ugly as ever but they're a happy couple, they even still have marital relations twice a month. And Waterschoot made it onto the local council with a huge number of preferential votes, he always was good at conveying a point of view, and did much to enable the construction of an underground car park. And Bemelmans, crazy Bemelmans, even managed to get himself on television, a quiz, just before the evening news, prime time, all the time, and in front of a huge audience of bored viewers. even managed to win a trip to Aruba, or was it Cuba, definitely something ending in -uba, just by knowing who painted the Mona Lisa, and while on Whadyacallituba, he met the girl of his dreams, Bemelmans, what the hell, who always hated anyone with dark skin, suddenly bestowing his genes on a string of mocca-coloured children, because there on Whereveruba the women are as hot as the climate and as fecund as can be, they become pregnant just at the thought of it. And This one this, and That one that. The sheer predictability of the whole gathering. You know, the man whose name you can't seem to recall continues, You know what I suddenly remember, and of course you don't know, how in blazes could you know what he remembers, you're no clairvoyant, We used to predict our future in class, we used to imagine who would make the most money, who would marry the most beautiful woman, who would end up in jail, Stupid questions, but fun, anyway, whatever, One day we were talking about who would be the first to die and the unanimous vote went to you, How mad is that, I mean: a class of thirty-two students and all thirty-two, well thirty-one because you didn't vote, all thirty-one agreed wholeheartedly that you, Vannolle, would be the first to kick the bucket, And you know what (no you don't know what): we were wrong, Abbeloos was the first to go, The guy hanged himself with a string of Christmas lights. Isn't that something. Gadogado is a remarkably nutritious salad leaf. The guy is happy he bumped into you, if you want you should check his Facebook page, all the information about the reunion is there, it would be great if you could come. You can like him on Facebook if you want, that would be good. Can he buy you another drink? Well, you wouldn't say no to one of those Notre Dame beers.

Do you know the one about the three old men? asks Lee, because when applied in homeopathic doses, Trappist beer has a wonderfully benign effect on a person's ability to tell a story... There were three old men, all aged around ninety, complaining as old men do about their age. The first is totally fed up, with life, because his vision is completely gone, glasses are no help either. He would often go twice a week to the museum of fine arts, if not three times, to admire paintings by Géricault and Bosch. He even went to see the Adoration of the Lamb of God four times a week, he couldn't get enough of it. But Father Time had played a mean trick on him, and saddled him with

all kinds of ocular problems that anyone who refuses to lie down dead may contract, cataract, keratitis, glaucoma, sagging eye syndrome, all in all, blindness. He was forced to give up his greatest passion, fine paintings, and cursed himself for not having had the good sense to die at the age of forty. Maybe he'll repeat the famous last words of Goethe when his time comes: Give me more light?... The second geriatric had been a celebrated melomaniac, obsessed with opera, and used to go, while his piss organs still functioned properly, to major performances several times a month, all around the world. He had seen works by Verdi at the Viennese State Opera, at Sydney Opera House, at Mariinski Theatre and of course in Brindisi, at Teatro Giuseppe Verdi. Just to give an idea. And now he couldn't even hear the doorbell ring, so that he often thought, without the least justification, that his great-grandchildren no longer came to visit. He had presbyacusis in an extreme form, in short, he was as good as deaf, and he had been forced to say farewell to his greatest love: the mezzo soprano. And all because he had lacked the courage to call it a day before things started going downhill. Perhaps, like Beethoven, he might in his final moments cough up the words: Friends, you may applaud now because the piece is finished! Only to fail to hear the applause... The third nonagenarian could not imagine what his last words would be. The author James Barrie had thought of an interesting valediction: I can't sleep! Or no, wait, Humphrey Bogart had a wonderful parting line for his character in the theatre of life: I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis!... The others wondered how the third friend's demise had manifested itself. Well, he responded, You know that I have a home-nurse, a pretty young thing, twenty-seven sultry summers young, slender legs, breasts that are neither too big nor too small, a cup size from which the good Lord could drink his sacred wine, black hair, stylishly cut, sometimes I think I may be paying her too much, and eyes in which a man like me would gladly swim naked, backstroke, his ziggurat proudly pointing towards the stratosphere. A few days ago she was washing my windows, she was wearing those sexy sandals of hers, her toenails painted with Chanel colour 500, rouge essentiel, and when she stood on the top rung of the ladder squeezing the foam

from her sponge, I could see her panties, the Brazilian kind, somewhere between a thong and an ordinary pair of briefs, there is no finer undergarment than Brazilian cut panties, black Brazilian cut panties, and in those Brazilian panties two perfect hemispheres like fresh white buns from Benny the baker on a Sunday morning, and I was bursting with desire to breathe her pheromones, to see sweat pearl in places where tattoo artists would hesitate to approach, so I said, Tine, because she's called Tine, Coucke is her surname, what would you say if we left the windows dirty for a change, we could write poems in the dust with our fingers, and we could spend the day making passionate love together?... And then she answered me with a look that could have put down a wild animal, if you know what I mean, and she said: But André, we made love together only five minutes ago... The deaf and blind friends didn't understand, what on earth could be wrong with such a virile comrade? The worst thing of all, he replied: I'm losing my memory!

The late Joseph used to say that there were two types of people he could not abide: those who didn't drink, and those who couldn't drink. You simply don't want to find yourself in the company of teetotallers, really, nor among the lushes. Wisdom on this level was a form of higher mathematics, Archimedes would have to acknowledge his better, all Joseph's friends agreed, and the only reason his adage had lost its persuasive power was that Joseph himself had died of a leaky liver in a clinic for losers. It is a fact that The Marree Man looks down on the lesser deities who cannot hold their drink. Teetering tottering souls. Anyone who loses their balance and knocks a table

over is persona non grata, and woe betide the inebriated skull who decides to behave aggressively. This is a café of good cheer, for the mildly notquite-drunk, for chatting and conversing, chewing the fat with strangers, sharing cigarettes and lighters, for elaborating ideas for later in the evening. For laughing and telling the kind of jokes those blighters in the teetotal camp don't even consider funny. Once there were three old men... For idling the time away and watching the girls walk by. Even the Fisherman, who may not have been a fisherman in real life but had the chiselled features of a person whose face has been weather-beaten for years in the salt and cold and wet and wind, though his features were shaped under quite different conditions, a splendid face, you would love to photograph him, in black and white, coarse grain, even the fisherman knows how to drink, though he never stops. He's here every day, wearing the same clothes, that long coat, those heavy trousers in which who knows what was unloaded, though they don't stink, smelling at most of damp cardboard if you stand too close, he's practically part of the furniture here, ballast that never speaks to anyone, never looks for conversation, having probably spoken plenty over the years. Every day he drinks his piles into shape, at a pace that serum tubes regulate perfectly, serum tubes and coffee percolators, drop by drop, he keeps the sedation to a minimum and masterfully under control. Sing a fisherman's blues for that man, I wish I was a fisherman, because he deserves it, tumblin' on the seas, he deserves it for the children he fathered and who never want to see him again, just as your progeny have zero interest in their father, and right they are, far away from the dry lands, and all its bitter memories, fathers are superfluous after conception. He's an honest wretch who never forces his wretchedness on anyone, he never buys a round, never, and no one feels obliged out of politeness to buy him a round in return, all square and all friends; he never latches on to anyone to deliver some drivelling monologue about the hazards of marriage, the danger of women, moneygrubbers, politicians. He just stands there at the bar, sipping his drink, under the sign that says Whoever drinks to forget should pay their bill first. He stands there like a moral imperative, like an admonition in case any joie de vivre might threaten to rear its head. That said: you're on your fourth Notre Dame already! And you know that Trappist number four, and even more so Trappist number three, is a demarcation line, because after that, the homeopathic dose is exceeded, drinking becomes boozing, the stimulation of alcohol turns to numbness, it is highly recommended to switch to ordinary lager. White wine is also an option, if served cold. But it wasn't going to be late tonight, that irrigation plan isn't necessary this evening, not now. Although you know: if you drink another then your engine will start up and you'll carry on until that engine falls silent tomorrow morning from exhaustion. But nothing wrong with a lager. After a Trappist, it flows down like, well yes, like what? You almost automatically think of water, but that isn't right, not by any means, you'd never down a glass of water as quickly as you'd swallow a glass of lager, obviously Mother Nature must have her reasons for that, you have to trust your own body. Let's raise a toast to Josef Groll, the insufficiently celebrated inventor of pils lager! Put that kisser on a banknote, name a street after him where the women refuse to let themselves go and hang out the washing with a song ob-la-di, from wall to

wall, believing that the sunny side is there for the taking, give the whole freethinking world a holiday on his death day, so he can be remembered with flowing streams of his own beverage. Of course you would rather drink the great Groll's invention from a large glass than in half pints, people have their personal preferences which may defy explanation, your own father always preferred to drink from a ribbed glass, somehow it lent structure to his chaotic existence, it gave a certain direction, but look, they don't do large glasses in this bar, they're for northerners, they say, pettiness looms in the unlikeliest of situations in society, but you're not a difficult person, the form could be improved but it's really about the content, without whingeing you'll drink your lager from a half pint glass, a bucket, a mug, a fish bowl, a chalice, let the liquid pour, the drool of angels. And Dirk, who has a talent for the pleasures of life, you would think that it helped that he's the son of a postman, keep an eye on those postman's sons, conjures a string of sausage from his pocket, sheep sausage, purchased from Mohammed, a garland of noble meat, the sausage is so fresh you can hear the sheep bleat, and he cuts

it into pieces. His motto: if you want to drink well you should eat well! He's right. Beer and sausage, essential foundations of civilisation; add an alphabet and you come a long way.

he time has come: you need a piss like a camel. It's only natural with beer. You can procrastinate, people make better decisions on a full bladder, so they say, because people say a lot of things, and write them too: books filled with nonsense keep the economy on course, but the only correct and proper decision you can take now is to get up immediately and go for a piss. You can drink for three hours straight, on good days four, without interrupting your imbibition for a sanitary break, but once you've been to the toilet it's like you've suddenly developed the bladder of a rabbit, an itchy titchy waterbag ready to burst each time you take a sip, as if the liquid goes straight through

your body without any diversion, like it has no function to perform of any importance and simply seeps right back out, for every pint you drink from now on you'll be dashing to the bog, and so there's only one thing left to do and that's to enjoy it as best you can. To watch that jet of liquid, how light it is, how pure, to establish what a benefactor you are to your body, your greatest possession, and that you care about cleansing your kidneys, nourishing your blood. You think of Sofie, the young woman with the long, blond wavy hair who you met last summer in the pouring rain at the Summer Festival on De Vuile Driehoek square, she had a laugh that you would buy shares in if you had the cash, she danced into your life only to dance out of it just as cheerily the following morning. She did something with urine for a living, at least that's what she said, strangers are quick to explain themselves to each other in terms of their profession, it was something to do with piss, although you never really understood what, but a person has to do something for their daily bread, and how do these things happen, a child is good at maths, multiplication is more fun than conjugating verbs, and before anyone has given it

any thought the kid is shunted into the sciences and a few years later is standing dressed in a white coat examining a few syrupy drops under a microscope. Looking for diabetes mellitus or pregnancy problems, or a particle, a molecule that might prove effective in combating that terrible disease that awaits us all and for which no researcher has yet managed to find a remedy. Someone has to do it. But Sofie, or was it Sophie, with a ph, like Hagia Sophia, was fascinated by piss. Born for it. She couldn't stop talking about it, despite the music they were playing by Archie Shepp. Spoo Pee Doo. Life is so much emptier without Archie Shepp, although of course it doesn't bother those who don't know. Sofie-Sophie should be standing here, next to you, to delight in your bowlful of fresh, steaming study material. She would thank you without a hint of cynicism, her laugh would soar on the stock exchange, and you would quickly sell your shares so you could finally bore yourself silly beside a pool in Provence. Tuscany would do too, because why be original? What you meant to say: It's been too long since you saw that young woman, because apart from her bizarre passion, she was also surprisingly bright and cheerful. By the time you've formulated that thought for yourself your tap is truly open. You have the whole latrine completely to yourself. no one to have to make polite small talk with, nonchalantly, as if you were standing next to each other waiting for a tram, tram four, rather than each holding a warm cock in your hand. No one to have to tolerate beside you, like some old person, or some kid, either way with some slight obstruction in the kidney that makes him splutter and sigh. There's always one, the nextdoor-pisser, leaning against the wall with one hand, where people write those filthy comments, and a good thing that people deface the walls, the world is sufficiently gentrified as it is, while with the other hand pressing his back, a mortified, tortured face, and then a stream of occasional gushes, spray after spray, like a garden hose rolled up after use from which a few last shots of water emanate. listless, impotent, that's how they piss, you're afraid to look at them, you know that they won't be able to deal with you looking at them, their whole discharge system will come to a standstill with just one look, they are keeping a pee diary for their urologist and tonight they'll scribble: Today I was passing water in the toilet at The Marree Man establishment, when some happy-golucky guy looked at me and wanted to talk to me about something totally unimportant, after which my male organ completely failed to function. Look, these guilt feelings never mature, you don't have to disturb anyone with your presence, you could simply stand and piss, a stream so emphatic and powerful it could knock the head off a cow. although that will soon be a lot less, when you start hurrying back after each successive pint. Though you weren't going to stay late tonight, so your hyperkinetic bladder won't have to process too many more pints tonight. You piss, you already mentioned, ça fait du bien de baiser sa maîtresse, mais c'est encore mieux de pisser quand ca presse, and meanwhile you peruse the posters in the toilet. The theatre shows of the day. the concerts, the parties, that's how to keep up with the town's cultural agenda. The Budos Band is coming to the Handelsbeurs, wow, you'd love to see them live, the way they make a trumpet squawk, the chairs removed from the hall for dancing. There we go. A sublime relief. Shake after using and reinsert the instrument into the

trousers. You don't wash your hands. Why bother washing with a cleanly prick like yours? Moreover, your immune system also has rights. As you return to your seat, there are two new pints waiting. The elementary rules of politeness, and what's more important that politeness, dictate that after those two glasses you should also buy a round. So maybe it might get a little later than you anticipated. Nothing to be done about it. You surrender.

here's a moment every Friday night in the café, a changing of the guard, when the customers are replaced. The late afternoon drinkers feel the call of their rumbling stomachs, blocks of cheese and gherkins no longer suffice, nor do sandwiches with slices of headcheese and Tierenteyn mustard, they have finished and discussed the working week with their colleagues, helped by a few glasses of firewater, informally noting the results of the last quarter, professional rivalries smoothed over with lubricant, misunderstandings resolved, and so they head off into the weekend stress-free to burst forth again on Monday, watching the dollars dance a hornpipe in front of their avaricious

eyes, the bookkeeping curves curl upward on the road to success. Then you have the students clutching desperately at the illusion of city life. Meanwhile their dirty underpants need washing, and mothers do that so much better. They have a last train to catch to their provincial backwater, out by Moerassegem, where they're beginning to feel a little out of place now that they know about Kant and Schopenhauer and Montaigne, slightly lost back among the cow pats. Soon they'll leave their squelchy native soil and settle where ancient stones have driven out the animal excrement, it's just a matter of time and of finding a suitable sweetheart with a suitable job, but for tonight they're going back, home sweet home, to eat some of that delectable stew which is always delicious, a delight after a week of tinned conserves and kebab. And to beg a few cents from their almighty father. It's not really so bad going home with their mouldy washing and the books they really should open more often, tonight they'll go to the village pub where they'll be smarter than their progenitors, impressing those who stayed behind with their adventures in a wilder world. They'll sniff a world-weary scrump of snot at the talk of pigeon

racing, the price of a cutlet, but they still imagine they can have the barber's daughter, even if it isn't certain. Who else, who else falls by the wayside at this turning point? The parents who picked up their turbulent toddlers at the school gate, one's mama, the other's papa, who now share a flirtatious table at the café. They see each other every day, at school parties and parent events, they participate in raising and educating their offspring, it creates a bond. So they share a glass on a Friday evening, to chat about this and that. But time is against them, time is never for anyone, the clock has struck and they must resume their domestic duties, the youngsters must have their bath, their supper, their story about that pug-ugly duckling, and then they'll sit with their spouse on the sofa, resigned to the marital void, watching some telefilth, guilty pleasure, a song festival for the dumb. Cookery programmes, the new opium of the people, veterinary programmes, blind dates captured on camera for a culture that eschews arranged marriage. Let them cycle home on their cargo bike, which they bought on a monthly payment plan. Cargo bike: a conveyance that wheels children onto the crossroads first. The time for the

apero has passed, whoever orders a beverage now does so in the full knowledge that more will follow, until the legs give way, until the keg is drained. the dick emptied. And look, there's Mumu Bulo clip-clopping in, she used to be your downstairs neighbour, long ago, when you were new to this wonderful town and satisfied with the stuffiest apartment you could afford. You heard them come even on your floor, the woman was music through and through, all her lovers left with ears ringing, and even now she looks greedily around for some loud and lusty melody. Everything is sex, says the Norwegian blond staying in town for a few months for work and settling in at your table, Sissel is her name, a name to start you lisping, Everythingissex. Everything, including everything that we perceive and everything beyond, the entire content of the universe and the multiverse, the four-dimensional, the auras, the imaginary numbers and all numbers after the decimal point, all of it is sex. And Nothingness, that exists too, it's also part of Everything. And then Lee, who always reads scientific articles at the barber, launches into a story about the miracle of life which two Italian gynaecologists discovered,

Giorgi Giorgo and Marco Siccardi, Lee has a goddamned memory like a national security department, how does he remember those names, anyway, while doing an echo on a pregnant woman, these two gentlemen doctors discovered that the thirty-two week old foetus of the female variety was masturbating for twenty minutes with one hand between her already finely developed legs; with a shudder the unborn creature came and the orgasm sent ripples through the amniotic fluid, which all goes to show, our destiny here on earth is clearly formed by our behaviour in the uterus. Twenty minutes is quite long to masturbate, Mumu remarks casually, and it's true, because anyone watching a twenty-minute film of a young lady pleasuring herself, which no one watches of course, cute blonde quivers while toying hairy gash, would soon get bored silly after a while, yet an embryo has no material with which to fantasise, what's not in the pussy has to be in the head. It's wonderful when the evening takes a philosophical turn. However, the moral of the story, la baise, that we should fuck before death comes to mow us down, is embraced and cheered and requires we raise a new glass. And Mumu, what's

going on in her head, do we really want to know, does she want us to know? Is there, why not, waking up all alone on a sultry morning, is there space for us? Oh, the tomfoolery, the delightful obscenities, there's not so much going on in her head, she had her teeth operated on this morning, two molars extracted, they were in the way, like guys sometimes, she's still half drugged and slightly groggy and really shouldn't drink anymore, but then, the week is short six Fridays, a glass of white wine won't do any harm. Nunc est bibendum. Sounds quite learned in Latin, as if carved in a rock by a god with thunder and a bolt of lightning. Praise be to god! Do you know, Dirk asks Mumu, why women watch porn all the way to the end? Because they think that the man and the women in the film are going to get married! Haha. Hoho. That should help her forget her toothache, a joke like that, although you hope you'll hear better later. She's looking good, Mumu, despite her wounded mouth, and she's feeling good too, the kid's with his father all week, and that's how the process of procreation and child-rearing should work in a family: create the child together, enjoying the business of making the child as much as possible,

and then cut the umbilical cord and go your separate ways. No one can survive in a family like that, if you want to put a bit of energy into raising your child you have to carve out time for yourself, she doesn't understand parents who insist on living under the same roof, they think that having progeny condemns them to a life together until the soggy cemetery calls, meanwhile the child's very existence is driving them apart. There should be a tax on overextended relationships, it sours everyone's life, it's ruining society. Bonjour tristesse, bonne nuit plaisir. She says: There's lipstick on your cheek, and she says it with a hint of jealousy, as if you had already kissed today, that's what she would like to do most of all, kiss, shoving her pink tongue deep into a man's mouth, a woman's mouth if necessary although preferably a man's cakehole, where she'll wriggle about until his trousers get too tight. But no, it's not lipstick on your cheek, what she noticed is rosacea, a banal skin condition that feels right at home in the faces of those who drink too much red wine, a dermatologist could treat it with laser but the procedure is quite expensive and the insurance won't pay for it, in fact it's a mystery what the insurance

will pay for these days. And she applies a little lipstick herself, the colour with the most symbolic meaning, the colour at the farthest end of the spectrum, which the human eye can barely longer perceive, the colour of passion and intense living. What shall we have to drink?

We're no more than stardust, material that was released with the death of a star and then began clustering together again somewhere else. Our hair, our skin, our muscles, our spit: it's all stardust which will dissipate after we die and cluster together again to form something else, the leather cover of a car seat perhaps, or a poster on a lamppost, promising a reward to whoever manages to find the missing cat named Choco (sterilised, short fur, yellow eyes). Atomically, we're eternal, the best party doesn't need a reason, but this party has one. Our journey began fourteen billion years ago, possibly a day or two more, or less, we were catapulted out of hydrogen and he-

lium towards wherever, it's not important, and our temporary sojourn now is this café where Spanish Harlem by Aretha Franklin is playing at volume eight. The stardusty barmaid with the hair dyed red asks the stardusty customer ordering a gin whether he prefers a particular brand, and he does, rye gin by Van Kleef, because craftsmanship and history and quality go hand-in-hand in the splendid products created by Van Kleef, he knows what he wants, he knows his commercials. We feel wonderfully weightless, we have lost nothing to eternity, unless atomically, and it's good to be here, amid a pointless infinity, there is a rose in Spanish Harlem, amid the roaring laughter, the small talk. It is a special one, it's never seen the sun. A stardusty young man is sitting alone at a table, he's trying to radiate indifference to his aloneness, but he's too impatient, the journey from nothing to nothing is weighing down on him, he's checking his phone constantly, doubtless a date, will she come, won't she. Chatter ripples through the café like a stream, the stardust beings touch each other, sometimes accidentally, but never undesirably, they touch glasses, they make eyes and seduce each other, just for form's

sake. Junior Kimbrough, Pull Your Clothes Off, super song, never lasts long, also at volume eight, which reminds Mumu that she's gone out without her condoms. Her handbag contains the contents of the entire world, or it seems to, but of course she's forgotten the condoms again, how could she have been so careless. Last time she went out, when was it, two weeks ago, when the kid was staying with his father, she had woken up the next morning in a room that reeked of socks and testosterone, of alcohol too, in a village which was wondering sleepily yet bravely why it even existed, Bottelere or something, if I can make it there I'll make it anywhere, as if the village even needed a name, as if anyone would ever mention it, next to some bloke who was far too ugly to want to sleep with sober, she didn't even know if they had slept together, just as she didn't know how she had ended up in that village, well, it's possible to have good sex with ugly men, she's had some experience with that, but she had no memories this time, none good and none bad, and she had rushed to the local pharmacy, there's always one in those appalling places, they always have a pharmacy, a pharmacy and a cross-eyed barber, and she bought three things: lens fluid, something for her headache, and a morning-after pill. And now she's out without condoms again! There's a vending machine in the toilet here full of rubbers, three bangs for two euros, always cheaper than an abortion, but they taste of fruit. Doesn't make sense, she says, a strapping lad smelling of strawberries, what would you say if strawberries tasted of you know what, why don't they sell condoms that taste of penis, that would be more honest? A woman who's crazy about dick, wants everything a dick has to offer, the taste and the smell. It's a hole in the market. No, she'll have to go to the late-night shop, she can't take any chances. Someone remarks St Petersburg is the new Berlin. You hear something. The novel is dead. One-liners bubble up all around, Eeklo is the new Zichem-Zussenbolder, Gadogado is a nutritious salad leaf, Quentin Tarantino really only made two serious films. When you get home tomorrow morning, because it's beginning to look that way again, vour sweetheart will wonder what was so interesting about last night, enough to make you not come home, and then you'll say in all honesty that it's the chatter that you love, the zingers people

come up with, their harmless silliness and she won't understand. Come on, says Mumu, Come with me to the shop and help me choose a packet of johnnies, it's much more fun to do it together. But you need a slash, that rabbit bladder, you're a goldmine for toilet attendants, you'll piss their entire pension full, although luckily in this café you can still spatter your excess fluid away for free, but Mumu suggests you piss on the way, in that narrow alley by Platteberg, legs akimbo like a real man, they're building a new library there, determined, as if the printed book can still look forward to a bright future, someone else just declared the novel dead, it's wonderful pissing by the wharfs, she wants to hear you splash in the river nearby, that's a happy sound, and by the way she needs to go too, so why not go together, she on her haunches, watering the cobbles. There's no moon tonight, not full, not half, it could always be better, smoke from your cigarette is bringing tears to your eyes, she says One day, just as it begins to rise, we should piss in the horizontal summer sun, You can probably piss a perfect rainbow, Poetry is all about realising. You sing De Nuttelozen Van De Nacht and she hums along, together you flow

down to the sea, your calendars have been emptier, the earth has looked uglier. One day soon there'll be thousands of books here, ready to motivate, to hone thought, to evince emotion, you can fit a lot of history in a square metre and no one will ever know that two people once stood here happily urinating, an entirely irrelevant fact for the history of the species, yet as sublime as any of the books that they hope to be lending out soon. Spoo Pee Doo, that certainly feels better for now. Oop Pop A Dah. The proprietor appears totally oblivious to your presence in his shop, he's staring at the television screen in the corner, the condoms are behind the counter, beside the cigarettes. All sizes and thicknesses, With stimulating mint lube, For a natural skin-to-skin feel, Fruity condoms for delicious pleasure, Ultimate finesse for a lasting sensation, For absolute certainty. Which ones should I buy? asks Mumu, in these matters she prefers to rely on a guy's opinion, She should take large because she has a hankering for a black, oops, a desire for an African fellow citizen, someone who doesn't mind being used and put out with a smile in the morning with the trash, but what do you care so she goes ahead and buys

the most expensive rubber, exactly, the biggest and the most expensive please, in restaurants it's also best to buy the most expensive item on the menu, but the shopkeeper is still watching the screen. Seven whopping johnnies, I spurted full for you, seven whopping johnnies, I spurted full for you, cause I love you so. Breaking news, he wants to share it with you, look, it's happening again, news that really does break, hearts and lives and hope, an attack at Schiphol Airport this time, it never ends, it never ends. The first pictures, taken with phones and security cameras, smoke-filled areas, corpses under sheets and bags and blankets, one man in complete shock staring at his left leg that suddenly isn't there anymore, screaming crowds, abandoned bags, shattered windows, shattered families, a lost teddy bear in a pool of blood, try to describe it, there aren't words enough. What did you need, condoms, extra large? Ambulances arrive and race away again, bags of plasma rocking back and forth, stretchers, oxygen masks. Sure, fine, one packet should be fine, few people are genuinely inexhaustible. The first statistics are coming in, nine dead but everyone knows that there are still many more to be counted. Mumu says The moment we pass from life to death our body loses twenty-one grams in weight, they made a film about it, with Sean Penn and Charlotte Gainsbourg, did you see it, No you didn't see it, It's supposed to mean that the soul weighs twenty-one grams, The soul: lighter than a spoonful of mashed potato! Anything else madam? Twenty Marlboro Light, while she's here, you've got to die from something, cigarettes are hardly the worst, that's obvious. They're saying that there were two men, they were firing shots, looked relaxed, maybe even slightly stoned, mowing down everyone, ratatatat, ratatatat, their final words ended with bar, it sounds so positive, then they blew themselves up, their putrid remains are stuck to the ceiling. Religious maniacs. With such little faith in the almighty power of their God that they decide to do His job here on earth. Odious grim reapers looking for the quickest, easiest way to gain fame, tomorrow their lunatic superiors will praise their martyrdom. May their names be obliterated, their worthless existence be forgotten, May their idiotic virgins in paradise have pus in their eyes and a harelip between their bow legs. There is no paradise. Fourteen dead, they're saying now, the number is growing, there are a lot of atoms being released to cluster together again. That'll be eleven euros, please, Would you like a bag for your sex gear, No, thanks, she has a handbag big enough to carry the cares of the world, it may be needed too, Well goodnight then and have fun with your purchase. A picture of Starbucks Coffee appears, plucked from Twitter, in ruins, a slaughterhouse on the floor, you know that Starbucks, you had a cappuccino there. The deodorant you sprayed under your armpits this evening was tax free from Schiphol, not that long ago either, when you went to Singapore. Twenty-three dead, some of them maybe smelling of samples from that same perfumery. How many drops of Chanel N° 5 will the coroner be sniffing tonight. The toll keeps mounting. Is it possible to place a bet on the final total? An emergency number appears onscreen, but all the lines are busy, they say. Everyone is talking. Thank you, good night to you too. Walking back to The Marree Man, Mumu suddenly turns pale, she thinks she's about to vomit, the acid has already reached the back of her throat. It'll be the effect of the dentist's anaesthetic, they warned her: no alcohol today. At the vinyl shop on the corner, Rock & Grooves since 1969, the latest by Khruangbin now available, limited edition, only a thousand pressed, first come first served, she pukes explosive blocks of cheese and gherkin and indefinable dregs onto the window holding her forehead tightly with both hands, she's vomiting so violently she looks like she could give herself whiplash. Damn, she was so in the mood to party, to fuck, dance and drink. One more gush, go on, something green like bile, and she seems to be getting better. Passers-by look on disdainfully, making fun even, as if the town's ambrosia were already too much for her. May get that record tomorrow.

Bad tidings travel fast, when you get back to the café there's no one left to surprise with the news, everyone has heard, the big television screen hanging overhead is on and new pictures keep pouring in, they're labelled unsuitable for sensitive viewers, but everyone is desensitised these days, incrementally, there's a new imagery needed to throw people off balance. Thirty-four dead and still no one has heard if they know anyone among them, everyone has friends who regularly fly from there. Melody Nelson? What about Melody Nelson? Is she alright? Call her in a minute! Let's get something, says Lee, We have to protect what they want to take away right now: food

and drink, with or without pork, with or without alcohol, women's hair, women's legs, singing, dancing, kissing. We should go to war with a smile. Forty-two dead now, eight hundred and eighty-two grams of soul, top marks for maths, if we don't have tears to shed we should party, those without prayers to recite should raise a bottle and drink, the disenfranchised of the night. Let's fight back with sensuality. Floris sidles in, Have you heard, Yes, everyone's heard the news, he's been slaving in the kitchen at Buffalo today, speciality: far too floury shrimp rissoles which you pay far too much for by the way, his muscles yearn to trip the light fantastic, it was a busy night, the restaurant was understaffed, customers had to wait too long for their dinner, the wine was too warm, he needs to unwind, and fast, he knows about a partv at De Naadoweisiwag, a smoky, broken-down shack with an old-fashioned music installation a little way off from here, there are metal poles on the dance floor and drunk women trying rather inelegantly to pole dance, sometimes men have a go too, they sell drinks in plastic beakers, a throwback to your student days, the place was falling down even then. It's crucial, it's crucial that pleasure wins and triumphs. Mumu calls it a night, she looks as pale as, as, as there's no comparison, she looks pale, time to go home, head over the toilet and then to bed. Dirk and Lee have had their fill too, they have a car to drive back, strictly speaking, in other words legally, they've already sloshed down more than they should and still be able to sit behind the wheel. So Floris is the sole accomplice to De Naadoweisiwag, tickets cost two euros although it's for a good cause, sure, tell that to the crimson canary. The ceilings are already dripping, condensed sweat, it's impossible to get to the bar without rubbing and touching everyone. Sticky arms and hands, salty breasts, arses. And that man, you know him from somewhere, the face seems familiar. Bowing gestures are exchanged and then on to the bar surrounded by an impatient crowd elbowing forward, the whole planet is thirsty, the last woolly mammoths died in Alaska from thirst, five thousand six hundred years ago, more precisely on an island in the Bering Sea, in other words, you have to be careful about thirst, do something about it as soon as possible, you can understand the crush at the bar, hands waving desperately in the air to get the bartender's attention, women using their most seductive looks to catch the eye of the men of flesh and blood at the bar tap, flapping banknotes, Five pints please. Perpetual Eves in the garden of Eden: if they can succeed in getting a man to eat an apple then they really must be able to get him to serve them first. No woman in your life ever managed to get you to eat an apple. Or salad even. There are primates who are especially skilled at ordering drinks; not you though: too polite, not assertive enough. Actually, you should order a whole supply of drinks, for convenience, but when you finally get a turn you find you haven't even thought about what you actually want to drink so you automatically blurt out two gin and tonics. My name is Tinic, John Tinic. You've postponed it long enough, now finally the sacred moment has arrived. Gin: liquid cocaine. For you anyway. Here they don't serve the best gins, it's just the ordinary stuff that you get at any poor man's supermarket, the only brand they have on offer here, a slice of cucumber is also a little too much to expect, they're not particularly concerned that you get your vitamins at De Naadoweisiwag, and the tonic isn't much to write home about either,

but great scot, that first sip sharpens the senses straight away, badaboom, the route to your brain is completely open, your blood is doing joyous cartwheels, your nerves are tingling. Plebeian alcohol, a block of ice, a dash of tonic, in a plastic beaker, and then, however inferior the quality, that wop-bop-a-loo-bop-a-wop-bam-boom sensation. Gin and tonic, it helps prevent malaria, people should always be prepared, we've vet to win that war against the mosquito, don't let anyone persuade you otherwise. So now you can lean back and check out the merchandise under the disco ball. Most are well in the groove, tossing their hips around to the rhythm of the beat, as common as can be, not the most refined of dancers. Well, Floris, santé, let's drink to those who can no longer do so tonight and let's keep drinking to remember them. Call Melody Nelson in a bit. A woman waggles her way towards you, boorish, vulgar, she's evidently been dancing for a while and reeks of a national collection of used slippers. Her head is as empty as a Chinese restaurant on a bad day, at least that's the appearance she gives, whether that first impression is accurate remains to be seen. She says, rather familiarly, as if you've known each other for years, What are you drinking?, and you think of the sad demise of the woolly mammoth and respond gratefully to her offer by accepting a second gin and tonic, even though you've yet to knock back the first. It'll be well down the gullet by the time the next one arrives though, where there's a will there's a way, where there's a will the way can be arranged in next to no time, see, your glass is empty, ready for the next. She has a talent for making her presence felt at a busy bar, a sturdy girl, she has her beverages ready in the wink of an eye and shoves a G and T diligently into your and Floris's hands. She's plump and a little coquettish with her ample form, there are plenty who like that sort of thing. Sex with an airbag, it takes all sorts. I have some new tattoos, she says, as if you knew all about the old ones, you never even met that puffball before, or is it possible that you simply don't remember, which may be the prelude to an interesting evening, but as far as you can recollect in all honest honesty you have no idea who she is. Tattoos? Yes tattoos, she had a few new ones done on her tits. You like to keep an open mind, why cause pain by disappointing people,

you're just too good for this planet, too soft, all she wants to do is show you her new tattoos, is it too much to ask to show a little interest, however briefly, Yes, sure, tattoos, brilliant. She has an amazing pair of udders, it defies belief that in some parts of the world they're still going hungry, and she shows them off without the least embarrassment. So what do you think? They're beautiful. They're Celtic signs, she explains, and her finger moves to her right nipple. This one here is a triskelion, a stylised triple spiral which is a symbol for masculinity and competition, though it can also represent a three-part cycle or a trinity, like father, son and the holy ghost, or past, present and future, or mother and father and child. Of tonic, cucumber and gin. She continues, because her tits are completely covered in ink, and since they're so colossal there's enough space there for more than just one triskelion, there's room for the whole Larousse Illustré. This one here on the side is a simple Celtic knot, but you probably recognised it already, (yes of course), it protects against evil spirits. It can also just symbolise love, because that's the great advantage of the Celts, they leave a lot of room for manoeuvre and interpretation. And here around my left nipple there's the wheel of life, the four outer rings symbolise the elements, you know, water and earth and air and fire, while the middle ring, which is actually my areola, is a bit swollen because I'm about to get my period, it could happen any moment, anyway I think they're done really well, they were drawn with totally sterilised needles, by Miranda in Oostende, her father did a tattoo for Princess Stephanie of Monaco, a massive letter s in her neck, and he did one on Paul McCartney's back, a recipe, something vegetarian, so the middle ring brings all the other elements together. And then the curtain descends over her breasts and she asks whether you've got anything with you, a gram or two, she'll pay whatever you ask. Don't try to tell her that you never use the stuff, she can tell by the way you look that you do use and with a massive grin on your face. You wretch, if your mother only knew. Too bad, kid, she'll have to scavenge her stimulant from some other source, the night is still young, opportunities are opening up all around. She has only herself to blame of course, she planned to buy a couple of grams early in the evening, it was complicated, phone calls,

then an endless wait for that dealer, a praying mantis in a blue Adidas tracksuit, the guy didn't even show up, like he had to supply the entire parliament or something, and eventually she lost patience and vanished into the night without. Someone was bound to have some, but you're not that someone. Pity. She really thought that you. She still doesn't really believe that you're not. You thank her for the drinks and watch as she disappears onto the dance floor where she begins to flirt with a coronary to music by The Afghan Whigs. Suddenly there are so many people on the dance floor, space has opened up around the bar. Quick. A gin and tonic.

Pleased to meet you, hope you guess my name. What are you doing here? she says, wafting a cloud of alcohol as she speaks. You haven't the faintest idea who she is, though it wouldn't surprise you if she were a Kayleigh or an Ashley or something. She snatches up your glass and takes a sip of gin. Oh well, what did you come here for, you came to drift on the tides of the night, trusting to the elements, and this is where you washed up. That's the charm of being driftwood. And she? Something like that. She always wanted to make out with you, okay, sure, just throw it out there, because you may not know who she is, but she seems to know exactly who you are, you piece

of eye candy, she often sees you walking down the street, with that typical gait you have, like a spring, and she just wants to say that she always thought it would be amazing to wrap her tongue around your tonsils. If you let her carry on like this she might come up with a few more confessions, you'll need more than a post-it for that wish list, she's not one to be easily satisfied, but a bit of a lick can go a long way. By the way, there's lipstick on your cheek, so there were other girls in town with similar ideas. It's rosacea ma'am, not lipstick, it's something to do with red wine. Spare her the bit about the insurance, bloodsuckers, you're starting to repeat yourself. She has a burning yearning to plant a smacker on your lips, if she keeps it up for ten seconds, eighty million bacteria will have exchanged hosts, don't think too deeply about that though, but you have to, tonight more than ever, you must have heard of course, Schiphol, Shit hole, seventy-two dead they say now, over a kilo-and-a-half of soul, we should answer hate with passion, there's nothing else for it but to make out en masse every time the religious fascists try to impose their will with this violent bullshit, all around the world, make out on Times

Square, Nevski Prospekt, Las Ramblas, in the middle of Shibuya Crossing, everywhere, even on Guido Gezellestraat, the way to heal wounds is to lick them, turn the fear we thought we felt into debauchery. She kisses rather well, has to be said, though her tongue is thick from the drink and she'll soon be slurring her words, she certainly can kiss, not a talent bestowed on everyone, an activity that many don't really see the point of. French kissing is often grossly underrated, a neglected source of aesthetic pleasure, in the modular middle range it is often dismissed as idle foreplay, a juvenile preparation for the real thing, while it really doesn't have to be foreplay at all, kiss for kissing's sake, l'art pour l'art, la charcuterie for la charcuterie, in its own right. You've either got it or you don't, and she's got it, wonderful tonguelongelong, thanks. She's happy she finally got to see you close up, well you can say that again, that was definitely close up, you just swallowed around thirty million of her bacteria, god knows what kind of filthy creatures got in among them, because she always wanted to speak to you. She takes photos, you see, morally neutral photos of men and women in moments of physical

vulnerability, surrender, alone or in pairs, while making love, coming, without it being pornographic, you understand, and she thought perhaps, thought but never dared actually ask whether you might want to pose for her camera. Haha. Next month she's exhibiting a few photos at De Pletz café, come and take a look, then you'll get it. Do you like Antoine d'Agata's work? because that's what you could compare it to, although she has her own style of course, and she shoves her card in your hand, Tania Huys, so she's not a Kayleigh, or an Ashley, and then she inserts a final well-salivated tongue between your teeth, life is sometimes so simple. Let her know if you think you. Sure. You'll do that. Meanwhile, you've had your fill of this place, De Naadoweisiwag isn't really your thing, difficult to put your finger on it, and in the meantime, the gin, it's making you restless. You need a walk, time to find another bar, there's so much going on right now and if you stay here you'll have the feeling you've missed it all. There's supposed to be a concert on at 't Sterfpunt, no idea who, but that's beside the point. Floris admits that making those floury rissoles has taken it out of him, the spirit is willing but the

flesh is weak, and there are more shrimp rissoles to be made tomorrow, which unfortunately he has to do himself, so if he's sensible, and sadly he is. then it's time to hit the hay. That's his affair, you're off, you need to get away, first priority is to smoke, it's been a while already. Then to 't Sterfpunt. Actually, it's remarkable how empty this town seems at night, anyone loafing about the streets might soon imagine there's nothing going on. The tram rails glisten under the streetlights, there's no one rattling over the cobblestones. Pity it isn't raining, that would be neat. Lights still burn in the occasional living room, families, nothing doing, today they share a sofa, tomorrow a hole in the ground, watching the news which isn't even news anymore. Or maybe they don't yet know how people tried to hurt us and destroy our freedom today, they'll read about it in the weekend editions tomorrow along with the design info, travel supplement, interviews and restaurant reviews, meanwhile couples sit cosily on their couch, a bowl of crisps, bottle of Luberon, a film about a mother with tumours, the father can't do the business with her as long as she's ill and so he finds solace elsewhere, feeling incredibly guilty but nevertheless, miraculously a recovery follows, science marches on, understanding, forgiveness, tears, closing credits to emotional weepy music, and then a washing powder advert. You have a lover at home in bed who probably wants a life just like that, madame rêve, although she knows you, madame rêve, although she's always known who you are and how you are, so maybe you should consider whether you're perhaps ready to snuggle into a cocoon. Imagine, the kids are in bed, they look like you but that's not really so bad, one day they'll tear themselves away, and you were only just tucking them in, they begged you for another story, and then another, and now you feel the warmth of the woman beside you, maybe you're not as infatuated with each other as you once were, sparks may not fly the way they used to, but every now and then you get close, and what you lost in passion you got back in spades with something most people call love, something like that, what do you say, would you like that, could that be vou? Make a son and call him Zorro! There's nothing wrong with that kind of life, you are capable of a certain tenderness as you stare at the lights dancing in these unfamiliar living rooms.

Jealousy even. Sometimes. You feel your liver again, it's thick and hard. At this selfsame moment somewhere, not even over the rainbow, there's an airport full of obsolete livers, a whole floor full, there are probably a few healthy specimens among them, your mother could have fried them beautifully, she could certainly cook, not all the bodies were machine-gunned. People should be able to call the emergency services, Hello, I hear you just received a consignment of livers, some smelling of Chanel. I was wondering if I could order one, Could I? And maybe a lung or two as well, So if I choose, if I dare, I can finally get to work on starting a family with a clean slate. It's quiet in the street, people walking about are on their way home. You could too if you want, you're halfway to your own front door anyway, if you turn left you'll cross Sint-Michielsbrug, from there you can smell your stall, but you carry straight on, an impulse, your feet follow a higher imperative, a right at Belfortstraat, immer gerade aus. There, a couple, new by the look of it, intertwined; they're just agreeing where to spend the night, his place or hers, their minds are made up, wam bam, they walk, to a student flat possibly,

with yellow stains in the basin and a worn beige vinyl floor, in the kitchen there's mould on the plates; though they're in a hurry, their pace isn't rapid, they know what's going to happen next, desire can be so delicious when it's suspended and postponed. In a while they will. Beautiful. You wish them goodnight, but they're far too engrossed and you forgive them for not having heard you, or not wanting to hear you, you don't exist.

Of course the concert at 't Sterfpunt finished long ago, time doesn't have time, it just keeps on rolling on, PJDS was playing, you'd have liked to have been there, though you've seen him strum his strings many a time, a superb musician, humorous guy, pure, but good, well you can't always have everything, so sometimes you end up with nothing. The remainders round the bar are in full agreement, it was a brilliant performance, and the old guy, with his ZZ-Top beard, the guest guitarist, he played the fillings right out of his mouth, inimitable, that guy, How come you missed it actually? Yes, how come? How does anything come? You sense that you shouldn't stay here

long, 't Sterfpunt is a marvellous café, you've had magical moments in this place, nights when people suddenly decided to honky-tonk on the piano. and a violinist clamped his fiddle under his chin, it might have been somewhere in Ireland, land of the bards, of spontaneous improvisation, but you're running the risk of collapsing like a pudding, it's too quiet here. Jowan is tending bar, that's not saying much, because if Jowan isn't tending bar here that means he and his phenomenal head of curls are tending bar at Achturenhuis, where the serious drinkers go, there aren't that many options. He's the last Belga smoker, everything's dying out, woolly mammoths and Belga smokers, though the latter probably not from thirst. Missus Cruyff is still there, with her inevitable cava. She's always friendly, there's no denving it, sweet even, but you've never been able to shake the suspicion that under the surface she doesn't really like you. Some people are made for each other, we have to believe it in our romantic moments, in fact you never stop allowing yourself to believe it, against all the odds, all the pain and misery, stubborn as a mule, double stubborn, yes, then let it be true, some people are born for each

other but you and Missus Cruyff will never die for each other. Even so, she's happy to see you. She says so and she radiates it. Would she like a glass of cava? And how are you, It's been a long time, There's lipstick on your cheek, Have you got anything on at the moment, any plans? Way back when, before you had your driving license and your rosacea, she was the creator of the three man theory, namely that all women should have three men, one for love, one for physical stuff and one for money. In theory you only had a shot at two of those categories. In theory and on the mattress. Even if it was only two categories, there's still room for doubt. The odd thing is that you never saw her with a guy, she flutters about among the menfolk, gets along fine with them, but she never makes a catch. She hides her secrets well, and maybe that's what gets in your way, her façade, that happiness she longs for but in the end doesn't wish to share. Well, she thanks you for the cava, by now there's quite a bubble bath going on in that skull of hers. If you accidentally cross paths again in fifteen months you'll pick up the conversation where you left off. You need to get away from here as quick as you can, find something more cheerful, where the talk isn't forced because there isn't the pretence that it's supposed to be leading somewhere. Iowan, the indefatigable, putting on his green duffel coat, asks if you want to come to De Penarie, on Bloemenmarkt, but no, you most certainly don't, De Penarie does its name proud, real trouble, the proprietor is a frustrated nonentity who whines and whinges and complains even more than his customers whose dull mugs he stares at day after day. He's one of those barmen who imagines he has to educate his customers, when they comment on the music he plays he calls them cultural barbarians. occasionally he'll even chat up a customer's female companion, what an idiot, but what do you expect, with that garden gnome face of his, he's constantly talking behind people's bad-mouthing the very customers who pay his bills, and when it's late at night and he's had a few too many whiskeys he gets aggressive, or lachrymose, you'd like to offer him a bit of rope and applaud as he finally dangles from a beam. Actually, Melody Nelson says you use the word lachrymose far too often. Call her soon. No no, not De Penarie tonight, nor any other night either,

you've had enough of that joker there, anyway Bloemenmarkt is completely out of the way from where you want to be, thanks, but you're going to Vuile Driehoek, that wonderful square den of sin and iniquity, smelling of cabbage and dope, where no one ever shuts their trap but civility always triumphs in the end, playing the macho is for disco johnnies, not for Vuile Driehoek punters, where people keep their opinions to themselves, no one cares about rank or status, and taxi drivers warm their arses on their bonnets and puff away while their fare tries to remember the address, where freedom rules. You can be yourself there, which is generally disappointing, but at least it's sincere. First watering hole: De Olifant! They always play good music there, plenty of Stax and Chess, sensual music, music to listen to with your dick. It's amazing how intuition works, but you put one foot through the door and you know immediately: here you can light the Olympic torch, the night is now officially open, a clarion call, trumpets and drums, and you're part of it. The surprise party you organised for yourself. Familiar faces as you walk in. Your hairdresser, with pupils the size of a stomach ulcer, she's been on

the mushrooms, and she's happy to see you. She is, you have to say it, the queen of all kissers, that's not entirely accurate, queens don't have to do anything, they just need to be born to the right family or to marry into the right family, all they need to do is spread their legs at certain times to let themselves be pumped full of dynastic progeny, which they can do while sleeping if need be, without a uterus they don't serve any purpose, but they don't have to be able to do anything, your hairdresser though, she can, she's more than a queen, she kisses with conviction, she elevates snogging to a form of high culture, like now, wollop, great to see you too, a couple of million bacteria, which sets a person thinking how infrequently you really feel welcome anywhere in life's brief sojourn. You didn't even ask and already there's a gin and tonic in your hand, if Moses won't go to the mountain then the mountain shall go to Moses, needs must, and there's cucumber in it. There you are, in all your glory, with your wild, unwashed hair, your step to the groove of the music, your cool Sultan shoes which haven't seen a dollop of polish in ages, the joker in the pack, you're not worth points but you do as you please,

not some God's bidding, and there's one thing you want to shout out from the rooftops: you have to be free. CuCUMber together, right now. The hairdresser runs her fingers through your hair, High time you came and sat in my chair. And it's true, it's time to feel the water from the nozzle spraying over your skin, washing the foam from your hair, her fingers massaging the cerebral sediment from your skull, the corners of the white towel sliding into your ears. And then, because you arrive after closing time, playing the scene from your absolute favourite film, Le Mari de la coiffeuse, she is Anna Galiena, if possible with a red cloth, and you're Jean Rochefort, the sun is shining into the salon, there's no war, she puts a record on, by Racheb Alame, who else, and you dance, avoiding a thousand imaginary camels, you imbibe the scent of the hair spray, she lights a cigarette and draws you in with her eyes, you penetrate her with your gaze. Then you begin to shake cocktails, using beauty products. Your best concoction to date was a mix that included Azzarro Homme aftershave, Gentlemen Only by Givenchy, a drop of eau de cologne, not too much, it's always tempting to overdo the eau de cologne but you soon learn

to control yourself, an ice cube or two, because this really needs to be drunk cool, a slice of lemon, delish. It leaves a stubborn hangover but it's worth the suffering. And when you've had enough to drink, she finally picks up the scissors and your hair falls like snow on her bare feet, the stars form completely new constellations. Absolutely, next week you'll come and sink deep down in her barber-pleasure. Another gin? Naturally! And sing along now: This here gin is going in, for everything I've missed, I'm not preaching, I'm not faking, I'm celebrating this, This here gin is going in, for every road that never ends, and so I dance for every chance I've had and lost again, so be a friend and pour some in, This here gin is going in, for every town I've never known, for every stream in my dream, for every dawn that rises in the morn, when I should really be at home. This here gin is going in, for every hill on which I climb, for every length I swim through all the slime, through all the shit, I raise a toast and start anew, In every bed I see deceit, who'll fluff the pillows next for me, I want to taste that mouth, death is coming soon, why be healthy, and this here gin is going in, This here gin is going in, for every bag I ever

packed, I chose a kiss to be my guide, kissing hard and kissing wide, the way I came is gone, This here gin is going in, for every reason yet untold, however beautiful or damned, I don't care, two times nothing is nothing is why we're at this party, This here gin is going in, for everything I love, maybe I should, maybe I shouldn't, I carry on and often wrong, but maybe it's just because I'm alive. Who wrote that song? That singer, she had charisma, passion, fire, tornado, and balm for the soul, she sang Threat of Happiness too... come on... she is FanTasTic... Not a good day for Trivial Pursuit.

You're like factory chickens in a way. Chicks bred to eat and keep eating, even when their hunger has long since stilled. Poor little blighters, kept awake, bored senseless in their square teensy metre, and eating eating eating eating until forty days later they weigh enough to be slid into an oven, together with crushed garlic, rosemary and thyme in their ripped insides. Their stomachs are ready to explode, and still they keep on eating eating eating because that's what they're bred to do, they topple over from flab, their guts can't process the excess, their throats can't ingest the quantities and still they carry on and on and on. If no one slaughtered them they'd burst, and even

if they burst their beak, wherever it landed, severed from its head, but no that's something else, blown over to another corner of the stall, would carry on pecking. Where there's a spasm, there's greed. That's how your lot drink. Factory chickens. And in point of fact, we humans have formed the chicks in our own image. This here gin is going in. Well who have we here, a jack in the box: Olivia Not Newton John. Speaking of factory chickens. She wasn't planning to go plunging into the night, she was sitting at home peacefully, with husband and children. It was supposed to be a cosy evening together, and it was for a while. Until those images suddenly came onscreen, again and again, and again an airport, and again all those innocent people again killed by idiots who thought the only way to be a hero was in death and so they blew themselves up because otherwise no one would remember them after they died. She was furious, and had thought to temper her anger with a quick shag with her husband, that often helps, a shag, it changes the mood, when she was a student shagging used to help enormously around exam time, the stress just flowed away, but her feller has a kayak race tomorrow and wants to avoid expending any unnecessary energy, the idiot. He's in his kayak more than he's in her, hell, she often wonders what he thinks he's trying to prove in that boat, he's long past his prime, irrevocably, but he's got that last little bit of brutish masculinity between his teeth and he thinks he can confound the aging process as long as he keeps kayaking like a maniac. So no, no shag, he went to bed early, focusing on that meaningless race for budding senior citizens tomorrow. Then she thought she'd look in the fridge and get slightly pissed as a form of protest, but other than an old bottle of rosé, hardly better than sugary water, there was nothing to be had that the sharia would condemn a person to forty lashes for drinking, not that it's any of sharia's business, what if she liked being hit with a stick, or do they secretly like it, is that it?, Does stoning people give them a hard on?, and so she hopped into a taxi, driven by a certain Yassine, a handsome lad, handsomer than his car at least, a proper vacuum cleaned Honda Civic, sure, a little Adonis, he seemed about as old as his driving license, he felt deeply ashamed tonight for his religion, so she takes a taxi, as quietly as possible, her

husband is asleep, oblivious that she has slipped out of the house, as long as she gets back before he wakes to go paddling among the frogs and lilypads, in the firm belief she's defending the universal rights of man by heading out to party. Her kayaker will presumably notice that she went out on the razzle without him when he sees her tomorrow morning, and then she'll have to spend a whole week making soup and ironing pleats, her soups have served the cause of peace throughout their marriage, any disagreement could always be put right with a simple terrine, if only they could have cooked like that at Yalta, there would never have been a Warm, a Cold or even a Tepid War; Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill, gathered round her chicory and shrimp soup, it would have made the atomic bomb on Japan unnecessary, definitely. Also sprach Olivia Not Newton John. And if those Sunday jihadists this evening had been given the chance to try a spoonful of her minestrone, then the airport at Schiphol would not be looking like a slaughterhouse after closing time. Well, she has libidibido, even if her man doesn't, and if he won't satisfy her lust then he can't complain if someone else comes along to respond to her

charms. Give Olivia Not Newton John a rum and coke, quick, she needs to catch up, shake it baby, three-quarters of De Olifant have already sloshed their way to merriment, but she has a fiery ambition to make up for lost time, to catch up and even overtake, when it comes to drinking, she's no Honda Civic, she has a whole stable of horses under her bonnet, and she's about to let herself be desired by whoever she decides will desire her, a person is nothing without desire, without desire resentment festers and destroys the world. She says, Desire, a synonym, in four letters. Lust! Hurrah, you won a gin and tonic. And go to the man at the turntable and ask if you can rummage in his box of records for a selection of the finest, sluttiest music. She whirl away the world's misery on the dancefloor, she wants to seduce someone, to dance for the dead, no, to dance with the dead, with the painful intensity of goodbye sex, dance with the dead, like they do in Madagascar for Famadihana, Say that again, Famadihana, when they dig up the dead from their graves, once the smell has gone, in the middle of the day, they dance, ob-la-di, ob-la-da, a corpse in their arms, slow, slow, quick-quick, slow. They should do that

with her, just say the word, Olivia Not Newton John, We'll haul you out of the darkness with the worms and roots and dance with you, the whole summer's day long, to Amy Winehouse and Blackie & The Oohoos, whatever music you want, you draw the play list up with your notary, and then we'll remember the flesh that once joined those bones, at first snugly, and then the more you indulged, rather more loose and flabby, though you always remained beautiful, your bags looked great on you Olivia Not Newton John, you understood that you were only a visitor in this world, you always knew that one day the glass would contain poison, even when you drank it, and you did it with such gusto, Socrates would have been proud. you didn't want to be that pain in the neck who wore out her welcome until she drove her host round the bend, you knew when your time had come, you knew it would be like this. But first a cigarette! Damn that smoking ban, do you really have to go outside again. Such hypocrisy. Doesn't everybody know that oral sex causes more throat cancer than cigars and pipes put together? White men are more prone than anyone, in this at least blacks get a break, justice comes in small doses.

The Human Papilloma Virus, look it up. It puts your father's early death into a more pleasant perspective. The entire Vuile Driehoek is full of smokers, the new leprosy. Don't I know you from somewhere? A not unattractive woman, with the complex character of a French verb. Hello there. tongue has been declared fish of the year, have you heard? And during the last national butterfly count the atalanta turned out to be the most common in our gardens, although the cabbage moth did rather well. And still she insists that she knows you from somewhere. Are you famous? No, dear, you were famous. It doesn't get much lower than that. Everyone wants to be famous, preferably for no reason at all, but used-to-be famous, no one wants that. It's like living past your sell-by date. The garden bird count once again showed the dominance of the sparrow, the blue tit failed to win any prizes. Have you got any with you? Half a gram would do just as well. A surprise was the crow, in sixth place, I mean hello, why not the dove at least, well done anyway. Famous, how come? Gadogado. Salad. She wants a selfie with you, is that okay?, the renaissance man with his selfie, for fun, she's got a selfie with the singer of the band whose name she can't recall, Want to see it?, What did you say?, Is that his name?, You should be in a quiz show on television, if you know so much and you were famous before already. We all die, everything turns out fine in the end.

Is it three o'clock already, the witching hour? You've done nothing at all, or far too little anyway, and now the smell of fresh dough is beginning to waft over from the bakery. The vitamins from your cucumbers are starting to kick in, you feel in shape, the gin is making you restless, it's time you signed up for a speed-walking race, a pity it's such a horribly ugly sport to watch, but it is, and your legs are determined to take you to another café on and around Vuile Driehoek. Olivia Not Newton John is getting bored, there are no grams to be had in De Olifant, everyone is greedy and hogs their own line for themselves, or maybe she's asleep beside her kayaker after all

and she's in one of those dreams where you suddenly wake up in a state of shock. There's bound to be something to score across the square. Over to De Sjarlowieter, where the customers share their herpes, make the world a better place, share your stds, it creates a bond, and since they sanctimoniously removed the mirrors and basins from the toilets, now people snort their snow from the toilet seats, still warm from the previous user. De Sjarlowieter, which has lost much of its old allure, a past that gave the bar its reputation, now it rests and rusts and rots, and you have to pay to get in, you have to pay to piss, and you even have to pay to get out, if you don't, the gold chains round the necks of the bouncers start to rattle with disapproval. Whatever happened to principles, why does everyone agree to pay to piss, a gin and tonic here costs ten euros, can't they buy a roll of paper and a bar of soap from that, tight bastards? But you can smoke inside, that is, you're not really allowed to smoke inside but people do anyway. She says In theory you should buy from atheist Jews, they have the best stuff, they don't add flour. She knows someone who has ten grams or so in their fridge at home, beside the cheese and the

americain préparé, but it wouldn't be polite to call them at this time of night, their friendship doesn't extend that far, she'll have to go look for herself. Where are those Jews? Five euros to get in, Not for a good cause, straight into the owner's pocket. You get a ridiculous stamp on your hand, the music could be better, but that's by the by. Main thing is the bodies, the life in them that shouts out. Come here, Tilly says, so she's here too, long time no see, you thought that she'd moved to some hot far-off country, obviously not, Come here with that kisser, you've only been here five seconds goddammit, you haven't even left your coat at the cloakroom yet, what do you say, another gin and tonic, and already Tilly's tongue is halfway down your throat. She goes at it like a kitchen robot, three thousand revolutions a minute, someone should give that girl lessons, she didn't learn the finer points of kissing in some hot far-off country. It's not fair, Olivia Not Newton John exclaims, She's the one who sneaked out of the house, make out with whoever you want as much as you want. you're not her kayaker, she can't tell you what to do, but then you notice that you're shoving your tongue into her, up top for now, maybe you'll bend

a little lower later on, and squeeze a nipple while you're at it, one is plenty, she likes it, preferably the left one. Look here, a lick for freedom of thought and conscience, a slobber for the right to assemble, a smacker for the right to come and go wherever we please. And she rubs her crotch against your knee, squeezes you in the testicular area, for the sake of equal rights with men. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, said Martin Luther King, only light can do that, like hate can't drive out hate, only love has that power. She got it from a calendar, blessed are they who always know what day it is. The dance floor vibrates en masse, the assassination of Martin Luther King didn't bring that to an end, there was poetry after Auschwitz, and karaoke in Hiroshima, I did it my way, come on deejay, put something good on because the world is a mess, blast Hikky Burr by Quincy Jones through those colossal boxes, let the speakers pour out the sultriest rhythms, Guru-Vin by Don Sebesky, so you can close your eyes and stand in the middle of the floor, arms in the air, absorbing the rhythm, being the rhythm, happy with the anonymous hands that grab you from behind, mating like flowers, a woman's fingers putting a cigarette butt between your lips, you take a drag, she whispers Blow the smoke into me, we only get filthy fistulas from the cigarettes we don't share, you take an ice cube from your gin and cool an overheated back, no trace of a bra, just a few spots here and there, Burning the Cane by Lefties Soul Connection, you dance better in your dreams, your elegance is no match for your fantasy, nevertheless, nevertheless, funky and sweaty, someone is unbuttoning your shirt, the shiny chest, hands on skin, nail varnish by Maybelline just where your wonderful heart is beating, want a drink?, hope you guess my name, let her say she's Lucy, she looks like a Lucy you know, could be twins, What shall we, Shall we slowly, steadily make each other unhappy, drive each other mad, or is this just this one night? Oh, you'll be crying for your dear mother when you shit stones again tomorrow morning: dark is the day! Look, there are those two Swiss tourists you saw earlier in the evening, they're so drunk they won't be able to ski for the next three years, Hello vodelido, Die Wahrheit nimmt kein Ende, Sie reißt dich mit sich hin, assuming you articulated it all correctly. Ich möchte ein Eisbär sein, im kalten Polar. Dance, everyone is born free and equal with dignity and rights, we know it's a lie, but dance, Dance, and enjoy, everyone has the right to a standard of living high enough to maintain the health and well-being of themselves and their family. The rosacea on your cheek is getting worse, It's not rosacea, doll, It's lipstick, the rosacea is on the other side. Coming to the toilet? Olivia Not Newton John quacks, I scored some, a gram or two, not from a Jew though, there may be a little powdered sugar in it here and there, but then you won't have to go eat any sticky buns tomorrow, good to know. It's bursting in the bog, lips need glossing, litres of beer and other liquids flushing, the impatient horny work each other off in the women's cubicles, they usually don't smell as bad. Can't you come already, there's a whole queue out here waiting to empty their bladder! In the men's toilet some joker has drawn a picture of Mohammed in one of the urinals, to the amusement of some who piss the prophet right in the face, it improves their aim it seems, the floor will be a little less sticky tomorrow. Not your thing. Darkness doesn't drive away darkness. Hate doesn't cancel out hate. Nor piss piss. Olivia lays

two wonderful lines on the screen of her phone, they're as thick as worms, seems that the kayaker called, seven messages, Where are you? Your phone will probably also show a row of similar messages. Please remember that this stuff has presumably been up someone's anus, smuggled from overseas in some disgusting hairy butt, for every kilo coke one person gets tortured? The Colombian syndicate invests two thousand five hundred dollars a month in elastic bands, to tie their cash in bundles. Shut your trap, how much blood do think your cotton shirts cost, your shoes, how much misery went into your wedding ring? This is the Free West, bitch, everything we have achieved is gained through exploitation, are we going to be hypocrites now? We dragged the blacks out of Africa to do our dirty work, and when they come here of their own accord to do our dirty work we don't want them. The taste penetrates your gums, it's bitter, you like that, your teeth are the core of everything, cycle fast up the mountain, get the blood pumping, bonking fast, feel the poison on your teeth, the last thing you'll sense when you finally croak is your teeth. Tearful eyes, the nasal sluice gates wide open.

Play that song by Willie Bobo deejay, then zingeling yourself under the disco ball, a snap of the finger, a sip of gin, ice cube percussion, oh, there's, what's her name, with those scintillating legs and that delicious

Where the fuck are you? A sour-smelling room, lucky the fruit fly season hasn't started yet, a Klimt reproduction on the wall, didn't scrimp on the frame either, it isn't Ikea, and the bed you seem to be lying in, butt naked, isn't the cheapest in the shop either, you don't seem to be having any trouble with your back, that's a good sign. The opened condom packet on the floor may not necessarily be from last night, not everyone tidies their bedroom every day, not everyone can afford a maid, moreover, there's no condom to be seen, oops, maybe this would be a good time to turn a little and see who's lying next to you. No idea, this seems to be the first time you ever set eyes on the

creature though it appears that you're not lying next to a man, that's a relief. Can you reconstruct any of this, old pal, do you have any bits of the puzzle left to add to the final moments of the morning? Olivia Not Newton John left at some point, no, that's not true, she was dragged out by her kayaker who came looking for her, exactly, it was quite a scene, the twenty people still standing enjoyed every minute of it. You remember you had a verbal exchange with the bouncer, because you couldn't find any money in your pocket, he didn't take kindly to your suggestion to pay by credit card. And then? Taxi? You don't recollect a taxi at all, that means that the woman next to you must have driven, bloody hell. Flashes of a supermarket on Zwijnaardsesteenweg, weird building, looks like an old-fashioned cinema, you were standing in line at the counter between the miserable and the nameless with sticks of leek and oversized boxes of crunchy dog food, it made your stomach growl, the chip fat at the chippie had by then long since congealed, but you walked out with an ocean blue bottle of Bombay gin and a packet of cigarettes which, just check, which you've already smoked to smithereens. You sang,

Spoo Pee Doo, as you were paying, the cashier visibly loathed you, maybe she had lived with a drunk, perhaps her father was an alcoholic. Who is that woman, surely you haven't forgotten. She has a bucket by the bed, that explains the sour smell. She's in a deep, deep sleep, but you can't just crawl out of bed without thanking her, even if you have no idea what to thank her for. For food and drink, for daily bread. Shake her awake, there's a dolphin tattooed on her shoulder, Hello Dolphin, good morning, could you tell me where in the world I am. She says, she murmurs, comatose, You pissed in my laundry basket, your rabbit bladder, and then sinks again into a quagmire of total exhaustion. You'd like to check your phone to see what time it is but the battery is empty, possibly as empty as you are. Damn, there'll be a lot of missed calls, and not from the cat. Crawl out of bed, however comfortable it is, make a note of the mattress brand, if it were up to your back it would buy this mattress. Ah, there's the condom, it's hanging from your dick. Good rubber. Send a memo to the Columbian syndicate. So that means you pissed in the laundry basket first and not until afterwards. Excellent living room this. Feels a

bit like a loft. Superb furniture. Good taste. You didn't end up with some sewer rat, you wouldn't have enquired into her social status straight away. that's not your style by any means, but you'd rather wake up here than surrounded by mousetraps and Cara lager cans. Your breath stinks, like a mortuary, you could roll five cigarettes with the stench coming out of your mouth. Is there maybe some coffee in the kitchen, one of those complicated machines with capsules you have to insert and then in an instant you get an espresso in a cup? Apparently not, you managed to pick up a tea drinker once again, stupid. Alright, then it's into the daylight without a coffee. Leave a note? Sorry that I pissed on your laundry? You pull the door shut behind you and forget to look at the name beside the door bell. What's this, hell, you almost fell feet first into the water. You were sleeping on a houseboat, no wonder you felt seasick in bed, there's always an explanation for everything. Tick that box, slept on a houseboat, hurrah. And where do you live then, that water all looks the same, no idea which way to go. Setting off seems to be a good idea anyway. Begin, that's a good beginning. The light's a little piercing, your

right arm for a pair of sunglasses. Winters aren't what they used to be. You'll see where you end up, you're not in the tundra, you'll soon find a place to catch a cab, then all you need to do is rattle off your address, with a bit of luck you're not more than a fifty euro ride from your front door. Don't think about money, don't calculate how much you drank away last night. It's enough. Time for a new life. A new liver too, you feel it again. Look, divine providence has planted a baker over there, the baker herself has the shock of her life as you dive into her shop, do you really look that scary? A cream bun please, with yellow cream yes, I don't like the white. Do you serve coffee here too, no, not to take away either, no, in that case without coffee, thank you. Oh, you're still so tired, probably you only slept two hours, that's what it feels like, if that even, you remember that it was already daylight when you left De Sjarlowieter. Not true. After De Sjarlowieter you stumbled into some other place, suddenly it hits you, some dump where you'd never been before, they had Studer Swiss Gin, top quality, a hint of juniper, a hint of lemon grass, to be taken with caution, along grooves carved in your tongue, with a shard of glass or a sugar cube, so the alcohol is absorbed into the blood even faster, because haste and speed can be good, lad, phenomenal how quickly the memory restores itself, this could be a good day for Trivial Pursuit after all, you had a woman under your arm, maybe the same one you found lying next to that bucket. Newspaper kiosk. Cigarettes, your last packet, then you're stopping, or it's possible you may stop, you can't keep playing Russian roulette. Alright, might as well get three packets then, as long as this is the very last time you buy cigarettes. You peruse the papers, the screaming headlines. That's right. Schiphol. Totally forgot. The balance of souls eventually came to more than two kilos, enough to cluster together to form one average-weight new-born babe. For those who believe that sort of thing. Life goes on. What do you think, how about a lottery ticket, one of those with a silver strip to scratch away so you see straight away if you've won? Oh, why not, it's a day to make changes. And yes, you have won, bullock all, you really are amazing when it comes to predicting, you were completely right. Unlucky in cards, lucky in love. Joe le taxi. Your credit card is still covered in coke, give it a tick and the man's card machine will be stoned and you won't have to pay at all. Key in the lock. And there she is. The most beautiful woman in the world, it's a wonder that she still has any love left to give you, how did you ever deserve it? You've seen her happier though. Well, didn't you say you wouldn't be late, Do you know what time it is, It's the afternoon damn it, I really don't want to know where you've been but it wasn't at a café all this time. You're not really sure where you were either, but how do you explain that. She says, It must have been an exceptionally fantastic night if it took you so long to get back home. Well, tell me: How good was it? Ça va, you say. Ça va.