

Beyond the Blue

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*Ter nagedachtenis aan Monique (24-10-1968 /
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*“And the way up is the way down, the way
forward is the way back.
You cannot face it steadily, but this thing is sure,
That time is no healer: the patient is no longer
there”*

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets

*I live in a place where lonely men
are afraid to enter, at dusk.
My room, when the sun is at its height,
is the room of God.*

1 RETURN

*He enshrouded himself in layers of melancholy,
chambers of loneliness, corridors of silence.*

*He concealed the mirror with an old coat, took the
pictures off the wall, forgot sounds and voices.*

*There remained the bed, a table, two chairs.
And the great eyes of emptiness - staring from
the wall.*

*He added not a word to this story: he put his
hands on the table and opened his mouth no
more.*

Even the last autumn leaves fall from the stark, naked branches: beyond the clouded panes, beyond the shattered windows of the eyes.

Suddenly I am flooded with the same anxiety of old. Soft, turbid: with all its venom.

As though it had remained here, waiting for me, prowling in the fog; as though Death had eroded nothing.

I live on the surface of things; everything gushing over me like water: gestures, smiles, faces.

The only sense of reality is in the consciousness of grief: the rest is a dream, a painful evanescence.

Nights in this house are full of faint sounds that I do not know: water flowing in the pipes, creaks; the slosh of passing cars, voices in the distance.

But most of all water, rippling in the folds of silence.

Even loneliness is not the same anymore: my solitude is a solitude beyond myself, my sorrow a sorrow deeper than myself...

The decomposed alleys of this town, leading nowhere.

White page staring at me, blank silent screen where one can cast off one's own extreme weariness.

The world is far away, beyond the walls of sorrow.

Everything slowly dissolves: vast and windy hollows remain.

Rummaging through my old notebooks, I find only stopovers, hotel rooms, nameless

outskirts. Diaries hidden for years in my old sea chest - handwriting I barely recognise.

Groningen, October '95

Naked trees, rotting leaves in the canals, autumn melancholy.

Another rainy day.

The raindrops slowly slide across the opaque window-panes; they cling, glistening, to the small blue berries in the garden; they moisten fragments of the wall.

I sit in the Room of Nostalgia looking about me, and I feel that one day all this will disappear, none of this will be mine any more...

Nothing will remain: these yellowed pages, the packet of Troost tobacco, my clothes scattered everywhere; the usual comforting, dreamy disorder.... Nothing, not even the Ullapool tweed coat, hung on an old nail - its ocean scent.

Like relics of a world already forgotten: the yellowish run-down armchair; a long-leafed oriental plant, as elegant as a faded tapestry, lit by the dim red Lantern of the Nocturnal Wanderer.

In a corner of this boundless room of mine, there is another lamp - taller than a man - on which the orange hawser we found one foggy night at Noorderhaven, winds like a creeper.

Then the reflections of a glass vase - its snow-like lightness of birch-trees rustling in the wind - and a sea chest once used to carry the clothes of sailors embarking for the East Indies.

Now it contains letters, diaries, photographs: in short, the soul - more or less useless - of a man, and so its voyage continues.

I was forgetting a shrivelled red apple and a few cinema stubs - blue and yellow - if one sniffs them, they still smell of stale beer and out-of-tune pianos.

Even the door of this room is red: red like clotted blood, like grief, like red moist lips.

The carpet is a worn, dusty green, like autumnal moss in the mountains: where one can comfortably stretch out, at nightfall, and lose oneself in the woods.

These the colours of the Room of Nostalgia on a rainy day: here, all the whistles of departed trains, splintered suns in silence, and cries.

Here the stars fall one by one, and everything plummets with the hissing wind.

Here lie all the shipwrecked vessels and the run away ships, beyond the wallpaper's scratches, in the Land of Dusk.

Lost chambers of Holland return blue from the shadows of time.

The Room of Nostalgia, in a silence dense with voices, and at the end of the long dark corridor, the Chamber of the Spirits, at Bessemerstraat, immersed in the glimmers of a shoreless ocean.

Then, many rains afterwards, the Room of Shattered Windows, in a gloomy Hague garret: in Enschede, wide empty panes overlooking the Westerpark pines.

Further away, beyond the railway, Isolation Room Number 27.

Her gaze, day after day - splintered, shattered, multifarious.

As though it could no longer hold on to anything and, in the same measure, as though it could encompass all things and beings.

Death remained crouched in the back of her eyes, but further than the blue, in time beyond the time of an unspoken necessity: that is why our lips were so fresh in summer eves and our fingers light on the skin.

Little by little, so many things fall away from me: they dry up, they wither; then, a gust of wind is enough...

Amsterdam, the fish market, herrings, leaded glass: everything so diabolically unreal.

My diaries full of trains, of gazes that melt away.

I am left with only the mountains, with the fierce freedom of the eagle.

My first days in Enschede: that absurd little hotel on the outskirts, full of stuffed animals; my room, narrow and coffin-shaped...

I would go to the hospital in the green glow of the evening - cars, faces, noise - but everything strangely muted, and distant.

What hurt me most was the colour of the flowers.

Then, they put me up in the maternity ward: it was very warm, with mosquitoes and buzzing fans everywhere; women with extraordinary bellies sweating amongst confused husbands and bunches of flowers.

Having slept in the women's huge beds, at daybreak I slipped away like a ghost - I went back to the green corridor, to the rooms of suffering.

My last trip to The Hague: everything I would never see again, all Monique's small things.

The transparent Russian vase, which followed me everywhere, in the chambers of the North: now it is in Vasse, in a room where nobody lives anymore, together with the old sea trunk still full of books, photographs, and old clothes.

It was a bright day in June: clear sky, smell of summer.

Medisch Spectrum Twente, June 10, '97

Even in Isolation Room number 27, a scent of freshly cut grass and the notes of a silly song on the radio are cause enough for embracing - mad with joy - happy to be able to keep on burning.

After the first week of isolation, in a strange moment of giddiness, we fled the hospital and went to have an ice cream, slipping out - just like that- past doctors and distracted nurses.

Monique was wearing a tight green T-shirt revealing a hint of her turgid nipples; a number of little tubes and catheters dangled from her bluish arms. Her hair had become dull and colourless; big clumps of it had begun to fall away.

That evening, she asked me to shave her head.

Then she wanted to be photographed, in the cold glow of the artificial light: a woman at the mirror, contemplating for the first time the image of her own death.

Photograph not yet creased, in the groping of memory: a bathroom, the blinding light, her shorn head.

She looks at herself sideways, as though hesitating - maybe even more beautiful, her eyes unusually darkened, and strange - her face frozen in a timeless instant.

The glitter of a bracelet – her hair on the floor, almost invisible, tiles... – everything the image does not encompass: she raising her hand to her mouth, after the shutter click. The pale mirror reflects nothing: the wind blows through my empty rooms.

2 THE ROOM OF NOSTALGIA

*She's gone, the girl
with her snow-like footstep. Dawn
bursts open its hatchways. The wind flutters
all the sails - shiny claws clench
a naked absence.*

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Amsterdam (January 4, '91)

*The hours sing amidst nocturnal glances:
bridges, canals, lights shimmering upon the
waters.*

*Words scan themselves in the mirror,
frightened, and windows look upon horizons of
dreams.*

*Restless shadows flicker upon the eyelids of
passers-by: pupils sinking into other seas, eyes
brimming with strange waters.*

*Like sliding into silence, nesting into the
crevices of the night - to be far away, a stranger.*

*Loneliness in the "No Name" bar – the sparkle
of a shattered, sharp iris – two girls caressing
each other's hands; whispering. White pages, lips
sealed, a sheer desperation, blue-grey.*

*I gaze at this journey's sunset with eyes of
wind and steel.*

The Amsterdam train, slow and rusty, squeaking through the ancient night of Europe: cities vanishing like spectral dreams in a nameless gloom - Basel, Freiburg, Frankfurt.

Stations, an embrace, feeble lights in the drift of time.

Solitude, parting, distance: only while travelling does one possess oneself completely.

Free, silent spaces opening up to my clear gaze that was once obscured: the metallic bleakness, the red and yellow flames of the Rhur coming before the hallucinating beauty of Cologne cathedral, livid in the dawn light.

Colourless flatlands, pale skies, stony faces - Dusseldorf, Duisburg, Oberhausen.

Broken stories, fleeting splinters, everything could be some *other*: faces, voices, sounds.

This weariness pressing on the eyelids, a bitter taste of beer, the man sitting next to me - his gaze, unveiled.

To remember all this, to snatch it away from Death.

The Dutch border, vast wind-swept horizons, tiny villages dreaming in the haze, sombre waters mirroring an eclipse of clouds: a glance suddenly becoming tinged with blue, as melancholic as Van Gogh's, in the transparency of the light.

Then, in Arnhem, another train like a yellow arrow towards the *Hoge Noorden*^{vi} through ever more barren landscapes - Amersfoort, Hogeveen, Groningen Centraal.

Just arrived, rather than waiting for the local train to the North Station, I always crossed the town in long, swift strides, still enveloped by the delicate chrysalis of loneliness, in the extreme elation of travelling.

I recall a huge square crowded with shadows, suitcases, bicycles; then, having crossed the white bridge over the canal, the Hahn's pianos store and the bakery owned by the crazy man with fiery hair, in a whiff of fresh ginger, before the squalid alleys of the red-light district and the spicy Arab streets: before the raw herrings, the sunflowers, and Grote Markt's old dented pewters.

Then finally, past the maculated salmon heads and the mouldering book-stalls, past the anchored ships at Noorderhaven and the whispering lindens in the park, the sudden darkness of an underpass.

And Bessemoerstraat - its wide-eyed windows in a wailing of trains in flight.

In my Groningen years, I often wandered aimlessly between the forsaken vessels and Noorderhaven's rusty barges, where some old hippies were still smoking hashish in wicker-chairs, among the laundry hung out to dry on the shrouds.

Above all, I loved the autumn sunsets, when the heavens dissolved into a turbid yellow hue, waning into reflections of copper. It seemed then that the boats, burnished by the light of yore, were still about to set out for the remote East Indies, Java and Sumatra: the islands where men die mad and happy^{vii}.

In the winter, Noorderhaven's sunsets were the colour of blood. A red stain would suddenly invade the horizon, strangely translucent, behind the ship's masts and the hulls imprisoned in ice. It was a brief fire dissolving along drifting clouds, carried away by the wind.

Then only the chill dusk remained where the Dutch glided enchanted in the blue, as light as Bruegel's or Avercamp's skaters.

3 THE ROOM OF SHATTERED WINDOWS

*Those tundra glittering pools:
are they lakes or your eyes?
And this piercing sound:
is it your voice or the shriek of a sea-gull?*

The sun is warming the soul again and I want to fly far away, riding the drift of sense, towards an eternal whispering undertow.

Life is not elsewhere but here and now – these squeaking wheels – dissolution of fleeting instants, in the quickening flare of the day.

I lived a long time in the vast fields of Death, where eyes change colour and slender fingers skim over ashen faces.

I pretend I've returned and, strangely, everyone believes me.

This then is the end of the journey: a heap of whitened bones, washed clean by northern rains, beyond the last frontier of remoteness.

My anxiety laid bare, the thousand undone masks of myself are set free in foul intoxication: I do things that don't concern me, I speak words that don't belong to me, I caress faces that I do not know.

May the road be long and the welcoming harbours be many - the lips, the hands – opening arms full of wind.

You will find her eyes everywhere: in the murky nights and in the becalmed, restless days at sea; in the White Nights, up North; in every moon-filled darkness.

Everywhere: in the squares sibilant with light and in the eyes of every woman you will meet, in all the lips you will kiss, in the breasts you will caress.

In the scent of lemons.

And, behind the eyes, beyond the blue, the ravaged face of God.

An old garret, in The Hague. We weren't far from the sea and we often heard, in the evening, the horns of departing ships: they reverberated all night long between our bedroom walls, illuminated by the glow of distant chimneys.

Sometimes, at daybreak, the shriek of a seagull outside the shattered window.

The sea, the vast emptiness of the sea; our naked bodies on the beach, among putrefied jellyfish and the waste thrown up by the undertow.

In a misty distance, Rotterdam harbour in the decomposing light.

And, like a splinter of anguish, the sweetish pungent smell of an oriental restaurant; the Konradkade station, metallic wires in a leaden sky.

Dark omens, since the very first day, at the Vermeer exhibition – *duistere voorvoelens* - in my diary it is written just like this, in Dutch.

I often went walking along the shore, towards Kijkduin, through the wind-strewn fog: I surrendered to dreams and nostalgia, as in my childhood, when I would roam for hours before the eternity of the sea.

It was then that I came to know the first shadows of my restlessness and I truly looked at myself for the first time – a vague feeling of remote lands and unknown horizons, of mysterious harbours in the night.

Already I could foresee that I would always be without a country, a stranger everywhere.

Homeless, lonesome, rootless: Russian, Egyptian, Macedonian friends.

Eyes that have lost their Return forever: no Argo is awaiting them, at nightfall, by the fireplace.

Thrown in a distant corner of the world, under unceasing rains – hiding – undone by exile.

From our old Hague garret, many windows open upon the world.

The pipe smoker and his woman, in the facing building block: their strained, unnatural gestures, their boredom.

The girl on the floor below, who sometimes appeared naked at the window, at dusk, and lit a green lamp.

And the old paralytic on the ground floor with a blanket on her knees - her exhausted gestures.

One day the man living with her stopped me in the street, he wanted to know what I was photographing.

“A wall”, I replied.

He didn’t seem to understand; his voice was hoarse, his eyes sad and tired.

The small neighbouring dooryard was a dump of rusty bicycles and scrap metal: at times a little boy played there, always alone, dressed in red.

One winter afternoon my father rang. His voice sounded oddly forced, almost playful. He had just undergone a series of tests and they had found a tumour – he said - pressing on the optic nerve.

That evening, after having packed, I strolled like a sleepwalker down deserted streets, amidst naked branches and fractured shadows on the pavement, until I arrived at last at the wailing shore and the piercing sound of sirens against the bottomless gloom of the sea.

It was December 1996. Some weeks later, I was to see my father smiling in his sleep, at

4 THE SEA, DEATH

I am your dying gaze

It was easy, once, to escape to the sea.

We stayed in each other's arms, still drowsy, in the warmth of our identical blue sweaters, while the train slowly clattered its way through the fog, in the perfect dawn of all departures.

Then, at Genova, we jumped on the half-empty local train that stopped at every station along the coast.

Suddenly there were seagulls, sunlight, orange trees, old men playing *bocce* in dusty courtyards, flaking rose and yellow coloured houses abandoned like wrecks on the sea cliffs.

We always returned to the same ramshackle Hostel, at Riomaggiore, where one slept in blankets smelling of mould, basil and cellars. Cats were scurrying everywhere, at Mamma Rosa, and even the landlord, always ragged and befuddled, looked like one of those seedy alley strays common to seaports.

Past the railway tracks was the sea, and the mirage of the sea.

Sometimes we strolled up to Corniglia, fantasising about the Yellow House that clung to the steep crags, in the autumn wind: we imagined vast and desolate rooms, faded wallpaper, corroded shutters opening to the breath of the surf, at nightfall, as the lights of ships in flight glimmer in the distance.

In the evening, we would return to the Hostel along shadowy lanes, munching unripe lemons stolen from the orchards.

Genoa is a labyrinth of dismal, unwholesome alleys where the wind rarely steals in.

There are just a few open places, at the top of flights of steps that face the Lighthouse: further away, beyond the ships in the harbour, one can catch a glimpse of the open sea.

One day, after having missed a connection at Genoa Brignole, we decided to walk to Principe station, where trains to Pavia leave. This is what I wrote of that strange day, in my notebooks:

Genoa, March '92

On the way, we bought oranges and we sat eating them down by the wharf: our hands fragrant and sticky.

The sea glittered with the oily silver of harbours: a cruel, dazzling gleam. Our bodies strong and pliable; smelling of salt, sweat, and tar.

Time spasmodically dilated our veins: it was the tragic intoxication of the sun and the sea, the dark heart of light.

Eyes drowned into other eyes, in a blinding frenzy: when I bit her lips, I sank my teeth until I tasted blood.

Later, after turning into a reeking lane, we plunged into the dark world of the old city, among staggering sailors and fat whores sitting on wine barrels under the red lights of the night-fishing boats: women of the waterfront, faces as ancient as the world.

An African girl was holding a baby in her arms: her breasts spilling out from her blue dress like mysterious fruit. So many disfigured faces, carved by the terrible passions of man - sinister, greedy glances; murderous looks.

It was life in its pure state; equally exhilarating, indifferent, and cruel. The wrinkles of a face, a pool of light, the cracks in a wall: everything drove me into a painful ecstasy.

I'd creep into shady alleys, unbelievably filthy, extremely narrow, that led to small squares of an ancient red colour. It seemed I had always known those corroded walls over which wisteria tumbled into a sudden shaft of sunlight: I could suddenly retrace my way through the labyrinth, retrieving fragments of my lost life, in Genoa.

A young hooker with a little girl's face, precociously emaciated, pale blonde hair: her beauty waning.

She stared at me for a long time before disappearing into the darkness of a doorway - the vertigo of my dissolution, reflected in her clear eyes.

That smell of sewer, basil and rotten fish: anguish was roving along cramped alleys together with rats and faces sneering like skulls.

In Piazza Caricamento, guffawing dwarfs in shirts and braces; monstrous octopi, moray-toothed fishmongers, scuttling crabs.

Then a bony old woman, yellowish, throwing fish-remnants to sickly cats in a courtyard.

One of them, skeletal, was staring at me with a single icy green eye; the other only a red orb, oozing and quivering.