

ROBERT ANKER

Een soort Engeland

Kind of England



photo Klaas Koppe

Over the last few years, the poet, Robert Anker, has turned into a true novelist with his short stories and novellas. Right from the start he was ambitious. His debut, a novel running to almost 600 pages, described the turbulent life of Paul Masereeuw, a bent lawyer – and in the process painted an exuberant portrait of the baby-boom generation.

On the face of it, Anker's second novel, *Een soort Engeland* (A Kind of England), demonstrates a number of parallels with his debut. Again, a lively portrait is painted of modern times, although he has – despite the consistently fanciful, outré style – kept it far more compact: this book is only half as thick. And again, the title of the novel, as with *Vrouwenzand*, which is named after the village in Zeeland where Paul Masereeuw had such a happy childhood, refers to a mythical place, paradise.

Een soort Engeland is, in a certain sense, the answer to the question in the title of a play, *Is dit Engeland?* (Is This England?), a chaotic, post-modern piece in which 'a single man' roams aimlessly, walking about the stage with a steering wheel in his hands, but no car. He sees himself caught up in a quest for a kind of England, 'yearning for the love that he rejects'.

The main character in the play also plays the main part in the novel: he is David Oosterbaan, a fifty-three-year-old actor and, like Paul Masereeuw in *Vrouwenzand*, larger than life. David is successful, perhaps too successful: somewhere along the line he has lost track of his own personality among the hundreds of roles he has played, and ended up a hollow shell. Anker shows us David's spectacular rise from surly tobacconist to stage star against the backdrop of the changing theatre world.

The novel begins in the void of the present day, but David is quickly forced to take stock of his past when he receives the message that his daughter, Laura, is seriously ill in hospital from a heroine overdose. David had banished his 'little daughter' from his memory and hadn't seen her since her birth, thirty years before. Not without pathos – as befits an actor – he determines to rescue Laura from the clutches of the dealers and lead her back to 'real life'. 'If I rescue her, I rescue myself,' he decides.

Meanwhile, there is another matter to attend to. To David's dismay, Amsterdam city council is threatening to demolish his houseboat, as he is moored illegally. The mysterious Brian Reemnet turns out to be David's ministering angel and able to achieve the miraculous. It is Brian who ultimately 'rescues' David Oosterbaan, towing him away, houseboat and all, with a towboat, perhaps to 'a kind of England'. 'Well,' muses David in the last sentence of the book, 'I've lost my tongue, lost my country, lost everything. But I've gained everything too,' providing this whimsical novel, in which Robert Anker intertwines historical and fantastical elements, with a fairytale ending.

Anker paints a lively portrait of modern times

Robert Anker (b. 1946, The Netherlands) debuted as a poet in 1977 in the literary magazine, *De Revisor*. From 1988 to 1995 he was the editor of *Tirade*, and he is a literary critic for the Dutch journal *Het Parool*. He was awarded the F. Bordewijk prize for his prose debut, *De thuiskomst van kapitein Rob* (Captain Rob's Homecoming, 1992). His collected poems, *In het vertrek* (In the Room) was nominated for the vsvb poetry prize in 1997. *Een soort Engeland*, his second novel After *Vrouwenzand* (1998), won the prestigious Libris Literature Prize 2002.

Anker is perhaps the most frenetic storyteller of all our writers. Again, it is all fantasy and theatre, but what a counterpoint, a crazy situation, an existential urge lies at the foundation of this wonderful book, even more than Vrouwenzand, which I already found somewhat incredible, narratively and stylistically. Een soort Engeland is Anker's magnum opus.

Trouw

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An interview with Robert Anker

ALMOST SICKENING REALISTIC

by Aleid Truijens (25 May 2001, *De Volkskrant*)

translated by Steve Leinbach

“*The same kind of book as *Vrouwenzand*?*”

Wrong opener. Everything in the face of Robert Anker, 55, contracts into a disappointed frown. “Hmmm...so you say.”

Fine then. Not entirely the same. Not the same at all perhaps, if you make a list of the differences. But there are nevertheless striking similarities between the first novel, from 1998, by this poet, critic and essayist and its successor, which comes out next week, *A Kind of England*.

The great reach, to name something. Again four decades, from the sixties through the nineties of the last century, are spanned with ease. The setting is now too the exciting city of Amsterdam, with its snobs and boors, self-satisfied arty-types, affecting immigrants, frat boys, criminal dregs, hooligans, dealers and junkies.

In both novels someone has lost his identity in the middle of all that commotion. The main character is once again an unsympathetic, sometimes downright repulsive man: in *Vrouwenzand* it was a shyster lawyer, in *A Kind of England*, an actor. A full-blooded one. A hollow vessel with many affectations and vain mannerisms. And, most importantly, both novels describe, in a naturalistic manner which is almost old-fashioned, the history of a decline. After 268 pages tragedy has descended upon David Oosterbaan, monster of the theatre. By that point he is, just like Paul Masereeuw from the previous novel, beyond all illusions.

That Anker’s novels occupy something of a solitary position in the Dutch literary landscape of the moment is something he can agree with. They are ebullient books, in which a great number of characters are rendered with bold strokes. Exuberant in language, rich in plot with many detours. No solidly built do-it-yourself kits, no poking around in the soul, no evocation of a hard-pressed childhood.

Even though they are published by Querido, ‘queridistic’, as the quality prose from Querido Publishers has been called as of late – that is to say, written in a sparing, deliberate style and ill-disposed to the hustle and bustle of the world – they are definitely not. Just like the novels of A.F.Th. van der Heijden, with whom Anker has been incessantly compared since *Vrouwenzand*.

Both are claimed to be “chroniclers of a generation,” of those born after World War II, who didn’t want to grow up but were nevertheless given the reins of power, or succumbed to the allure of alcohol, sex and drugs. Anker is not pleased with this characterization.

“A journalistic or historical need to record the character of an era is not something I have,” he says. “My last two books are in the first place novels. There is something of my own history in them, that of my own time. I was close to it. I know

the type of people I describe. Van der Heijden isn't a chronicler of his generation either; I wouldn't wish that on him. We're both novelists but very different ones, in spite of superficial similarities in the subject matter and the setting of our novels. He is a teller of fairy tales, I think. He wants to drag out the poetry. I am ultimately in search of truth. I want to be confrontational."

Truth? Is there still someone in our Godless and ideology-free era, in which a disengaged cultural relativism is the norm, who is sitting there waiting for the truth of a novelist?

"I don't want to rub anyone's nose in my truth, but I want my book to show something of what's going on in the world," Anker says seriously, putting his statement in perspective. "To play a role in what is called 'the discourse,' to bump up against the general currents of thought. Literature must provide nourishment for that thinking. I have no pretensions to immortality. However I think literature should be imaginative. In that form it will last too."

You have to know exactly where you want to take the reader, in his view. Theatrics, but a genuine sort. "Look, in the sixties David Oosterbaan in my novel is quite taken with Artaud. You've got those young guys shooting the shit about the spectator needing to get a "punch," a blow between the eyes, so he leaves the theatre in a stupor and gets run over by a tram – doesn't matter, because he's been confronted with the deepest truth...well, that's an exaggeration, but in some sense I want to attain that as well. I expect that from the other arts to: to be taken along, to be literally transported."

Although the skillful embellishment of an era may be a minor consideration in Anker's prose, for those who still can remember the time, dozens of recognisable, faultlessly rendered types shuffle past. David Oosterbaan, a unsavoury man in his fifties dressed in campy teenage attire, a man without an identity, brings together a good number of them in his chameleon-like personality. He flits from the one role to the other, fills himself with other people's lives and affects the corresponding voices and mannerisms.

He is the miserable owner of a tobacco store, saddled with a wife and baby. Later on he's a student at the drama school, where there is empty chatter about the "destruction of the fossilised forms" and the "Theater of Cruelty." An actor in condescending consciousness-raising theatre in the seventies, singer in the proletarian band *On the Job*. And eventually David prostrates himself before "bourgeois drama" and plays his starring roles. Before then he had to recover from his first breakdown at a bio-dynamic farm in the arms of an organically grown girlfriend: David suffers from a loss of his identity and had to be institutionalised for a year.

Years later he performs in *Is This England?*, a play that appealed to director Dok Waterzooij because "there was no rhyme or reason to it," in short, a perfect representation of our "mental homelessness," while during the day he rehearses for *TheaterDestruction* – a play, which calls theatre itself into question, of course, with Hamlet as a

militant homosexual – and it is then that the bell tolls for David’s downfall. A phone call from the hospital reminds him that he has a daughter. She had been erased from his memory for a short thirty years. Laura is in intensive care: pale as a corpse, all skin and bones, a girl with the face of his mother. A junkie. And on the spot the conviction swells in his breast with the pathos of an actor: he will save her, “his little girl.”

And then the second stage of this novel unfolds, the junkie scene. With the unimaginably filthy mess in Laura’s apartment, the toothless petty thieves who are her friends, the tall tales she tells to escape from treatment, the cunning ways she uses to coax money from those around her. It is heartrendingly written, almost sickening realistic.

No, Anker shakes his head. Oh please no, not realistic. “Realism doesn’t not exist at all. It’s all smoke and mirrors. But it may sometimes look quite real. In order to depict, in order to show what’s really going on with the characters. Take that awful consciousness-raising theatre. The way David behaves there is typical. Education through drama, solidarity with the oppressed – nonsense, all of it. I’ve always found that humourless, talentless business repellent.

“Some business manager from Sater or Prologue, or some other radical theatre group from that era, jumping onto a stage and yelling out, ‘We’re fighting together with the workers, the soldiers and the students!’ Totally false. Even in his time of engagement David was above all an actor; he just wanted to perform, to chew the scenery, to shine. He’s addicted to greasepaint and glitter.”

Anker like to play with extremes. He has David bicycle through the air, together with the civil servant Brian Reemnet, a shadowy figure who turns up as a sort of guardian angel who pedals with him to the nastiest corners of the city. “A novel needs that absurdism, as a way to balance things out.” And at the same time he brings all sorts of real, quite well known people into his made-up story: Gerardjan Rijnders, Lodewijk de Boer, Leonard Frank, Guus Oster, Ellen Vogel.

“I find that stimulating,” he says, “that rubbing up against reality, in a novel that is flamboyantly not-real. At the release party of my book Eric Schnieder will read a passage, the one in which he himself appears naturally. (“Shall I tell you a good story?” David drawls to a girl in the novel, “It happened to Eric Schneider. Do you *know* Eric Schneider? *Tremendous* actor. I’ve done a lot with him.” And so on.). When I asked him to the presentation, he said that it sounded like a ‘*deelightful*’ thing to do. And he thought I had done a ‘frighteningly good job of getting at the very core’ of the actor in the book. I protested, ‘Yes, but Eric, an actor doesn’t have a core, does he?’ ‘Well, yes, that’s what I meant too,’ said Schneider. ‘Eh, not such a happy thing to think about.’ A actor who is always acting. But a good one. Just like David.”

A novel, Anker emphasised once again, exists only in language. “That’s a cliché of course, but when you read the reviews you sometimes get the idea that it’s all about the story. Despite that, in the first place it’s all about the tone, style, rhythm, registers, composition, and all those things together, the way that the book comes across to you.

But without an interesting plot it isn't going anywhere.”

Literature is also entertainment, he believes. The demanding reader must be “kept busy, and every now and then get a kick.” A poem, a novel, it must always be an adventure for the reader. “For *A Sort of England* I collected anecdotes, looked at old videos. You can use things like that to spice up the story. You want to write something that is a treat to experience.”

Anker takes great pleasure in having all his characters speak the way they sound. A spiteful queer is called without wasting words “Albèr.” Laura’s Moroccan neighbour jabbars: “Iz not good with Lra, eh? Iz too bad, sins shiz a gd grl!” And the Surinamese Brian Reemnet switches without difficulty from Standard Dutch to the dialect of his native Drietabbetje: “Tekka a picture? Azza memento, y’know, ‘cause afterwards you’re not gonna believe me anymore.” Anker has such a mastery of imitation that he is at times in danger of overacting, of hamming it up in his desire to describe.

“I want to hear a voice in a story. Then somebody stays himself. I literally want to hear all those characters. Doing this you skirt along a fine line; I know that, and sometimes you cross that line. From time to time I have a certain tendency to run on in the descriptions.” Being a poet provides a counterweight to that unbridled desire to describe: “I’m still a real poet, you know. I do also like the little things, peace and repose.”

But things aren’t so peaceful in Anker’s poetry. Junkies, criminals, shady figures from the street regularly crop up there too. It must, he thinks, have something to do with the shock he got when as a boy he left the country to come live in the big city. That theme dominates his entire *oeuvre*: the city barging into the life of a boy who grew up in peace and security.

There must also be an element of fear, he thinks, in his fascination for the seamy side of life, for derelicts, junkies, mumbling vagrants. “Fear of life, fear of degeneration. I can’t keep my eyes and ears away from those sorts of people. I can’t close myself off from it. Recently I was sitting behind the window in a café around the corner from here. A man came walking by, a neat man with an attaché case. I thought: there’s something up with him. And from that moment things went awry. Not two months later I came across him, mumbling to himself in a doorway, completely destitute. I recognised the desperation in that man because it’s my greatest fear: only one thread needs to come loose, and then there you are too, in that doorway.

The stage exerts that same dubious power of attraction on him, says Anker. He knows its pull, and yet at the same time he harbours a deep aversion to it. “That loss of identity, that’s the danger. When David Oosterbaan thinks of himself, he only hears murmuring. That must be awful.

“I grew up with drama. My mother and my sister acted in the theatre, as amateurs, true, but they really were into it. Even at a very early age, when my mother would be studying a role at home, I had to be her co-star. I tried very hard to do that too, to completely immerse myself in it, to do all sorts of voices. That’s where it

started.

“In high school I acted in plays, I was in bands – just like David.” And yes, he doesn’t deny it, he also wanted to be an actor. He took part in an ‘orientation course’ for the drama school, just like David. “But David had talent, I didn’t; I got rejected. I did have a gift for cabaret though, they thought.”

In the end he is happy things worked out that way. Better a writer than an actor. “Without a text an actor is nothing. The foundation has to be a Pinter, a Beckett, a Hugo Claus, a Judith Herzberg. Someone with a theme, imagination, a vision of the world. Drama is still a literary genre. I share Oosterbaan’s opinion that Dutch stage directors of the last twenty years have imposed their ideas too much on the text. Cutting out whole passages, combining two texts. Having a woman play Beckett. I understand it; this is the only way that drama can become its own art form. But it can also cause things to get off track.”

After all those years of unabashed acting, David comes to the conclusion that his occupation is meaningless: as an actor he is only standing in the way, an obstacle between the text and the audience, and that thought literally strikes him dumb. “Death to the actor!” he cries out furiously. But by then he’s in a pretty bad state.

The loss of self, a danger that naturally also looms for a writer who gets wrapped up in his characters. Anker knows the feeling of coming loose from the world while writing. “David Oosterbaan loses himself after a performance, and needs a day to recover all the fragments of himself. That he disappears after one sentence in it, gave me chills to describe. You can also fall madly in love with a girl who is a product of your imagination. More so than poetry, prose lifts you out of time. Sometimes I look at the clock: it’s one o’clock. I eat a sandwich, and when I look up again it’s suddenly five. You don’t know where you’ve been. You get completely immersed in what you’re creating.

He plays the piano every day, something that helps him to get grounded again. Musical, yes, that too. And then there are the reviews that have to be written nearly every week for the newspaper *Het Parool*. Two days a week he teaches at a high school. He gets pleasure from working with young people, and their slang keeps him close to the life.

Many-sided? “Oh, these things just happen of their own accord. You have to earn money, and so you look for jobs, and you go on writing in between. Writing novels was something he came too only recently. “The nice thing about writing a novel is that you can use it all: a feeling for rhythm and composition, for styles of speaking, a sharp eye. I like to use my eyes.

“If I had to do it all over again, I would want to be a visual artist. The minute I turned eighteen I would have applied to the Rietveld Academy. Really I’m a visual artist, I think coyly once in a while. Yes, I do have vision. I see in front of me precisely the way it should be. But sad to say, I can’t draw.”

Sample translation from

***A Kind of England* by Robert Anker (Amsterdam: Querido, 2001)**

Translated by Steve Leinbach

Tabitha

“David, where are you? David! David Oosterbaan!”

David looks up to see who’s calling him. Since he’s on his bicycle, he doesn’t have long to investigate. He rides onto the pavement and glides off the pedals to the ground. No one to be seen. The voice, which seemed vaguely familiar, does not repeat itself. He takes another good look around, but doesn’t see anyone who could have called him. Fine, levitation’s certainly nothing new to him; he once had a sort of vision which was a little creepy; and now he’s hearing voices, too.

Where is he exactly? By Tabitha, the retirement home on the corner of the Ceintuurbaan and the Amsteldijk, where an enormous church once stood. Look at them sitting there nodding their heads in the residents’ lounge. What a cynical name! David happens to know that Tabitha was a woman who was raised from the dead by the Apostle Peter. But wait a minute, then that would have to be... sure enough, across the street is Gijs’s café... no shit. Gijs had been found dead last year in his business, murdered. It was in *Het Parool*, with a last name alongside. What was the name again? Dekker, Dekkers? David had never known it; to them he was just Gijs, one of Arthur’s discoveries actually. Gijs waited tables at a café at the Leidseplein, and Gijs was different: cultivated, discreet, erudite, witty, the college dropout type. Hard to follow too, with intriguing stories you weren’t able to question because you’d get evasive answers, and anyway you’d feel like a killjoy. Soft voice. After Gijs took over this café – its actual name (Amstelvaart) David had never known either; Gijs had always called it “the

mother's womb" – they continued going there for a time, until Arthur went off to Groningen. David came again about five years ago, but Gijs, who hadn't grown older so much as fatter, didn't recognize him, and David left it at that. It had been years since he had seen Arthur too, fifteen maybe. So it goes. You meet each other; you blaze up together for a time; you brush the ashes off your shoulders and go your own way again. Anyone who denies this is a liar or subservient to the ideology of friendship. David has no friends in the sense of having an emotional connection with someone. David only has only like-minded peers – a temporary state of affairs. It's all a matter of blazing, which happens in the beginning, but doesn't last.

He looks up at the gnomes on the roof who are playing a ball. A fairytale house. But who was it who just called him? Amstelveert. Pauvre Gijs. What remains of us? A short report in the newspaper that catches the eye of maybe ten people: who was it again? And that's it.

He wheels his bike up the bridge, a bit short of breath; he smokes and drinks too much – yes doctor, we know. It is May but it's still cold and there's a wind, the sort of unpleasant wind that grabs your neck with its chilly hand, and then whips back against your chest. Fortunately it's dry. The sun is even shining between the drifting clouds and sparkling on the water. Screaming gulls swoop down one at the time, on to one gull to be precise, the one with the crust of bread in his beak. Rubbish. Utterly without dignity, unlike the magpie or the crow – also rubbish, but with allure. On the other side of the canal in the distance is the Carré Theatre, scene of his bitterest triumph, in 1995. An ovation, lasting minutes every night, but he was fed up with it. After fifteen evenings of ripping his own profession to shreds as Thomas Bernhard's impresario, he gave it up, with still twenty performances to go. Overworked, exhausted, and yes, yes, he drank too much, but that wasn't the reason – or the cause. He called it quits and retired to a monastery for a year, with the Trappists. He didn't talk for the whole year he was there. He, the actor: silent for a year! He tried writing poems, but that yielded nothing because at the time he still thought that art was supposed to be connected to one's inner self, one's emotional life, one's ideas if need be, and he had been

unable to discover any of these things. Whenever he listened to his inner self he heard only murmuring. But who called him just now? He knows the voice from somewhere. Could it have come from himself?

Is there something there after all?

Loud ringing announces that the bridge is opening, and the red and white barriers are lowered, intended for a small tugboat, which is pulling an entire house: brick, two floors, chimney with wrought ironwork – a houseboat, say that again! Brand new. You can be sure that guy doesn't have to take any shit about where to moor his boat! The Brians of this world leave people like that alone, they're their kind of people. Just look at it, what an eyesore, while his own barge, a real ship that belongs there, hardly recognizable as a house, that's not allowed.

Temper, temper.

He sinks again into the radiance of the water. There is undeniably something mythic about rivers, more than any sea or lake. Why is that? Because they have another side? Because they form a clear division? Or because of the running water? The Lethe, *panta rhei*, and everything winds up in a sea of forgetfulness. And, let's not forget the Styx! Amstelvaart. *Pauvre Gijs*. To be or not to be, that question.

And the River of Time. He mumbles:

So you're swallowed up by the only river
and just as swiftly as that river itself.

Walk on, boys, no fishing grounds, no ice cream cart.

Since wising up about the true nature of poetry, the last few months David has been living under a burst of poetic inspiration. He doesn't know where it's coming from; he sees it simply as a language that comes easily to him, and once the words are there, he slides them around long enough until they mean something. He often regards them as "pretty profound," but the process goes on completely outside of him. Not one poem has been finished, only scraps,

half-done work.

He hops on his bicycle and rides down the bridge to the left, turns in a street, Ruyschstraat. He stops by the Wibautstraat, a wide thoroughfare that is less easy to cross, in order to orient himself, for when does ever he go to the eastern part of the city nowadays? He needs the (First?) Oosterparkstraat, since he thinks he remembers that that was where the Hospital of Our Lady was located, and he figures that he'll need to turn right for that.

On the other side of the pedestrian crossing a mother is walking towards him with a daughter of about three holding her hand, looking very cross. David smiles and gives her a quick wave. Immediately the most radiant smile he's seen in ages breaks through on her face, and the girl begins to wave excitedly too.

“Look mummy, that man's waving at me.”

Oh great, “that man's waving at me” – get going, before you know it, they'll be calling the police. But they weren't ever going to take that smile away from him. It's as simple as that: you're cross because you can't run ahead on your own but you've got to stay with your mother, and then somebody waves to you and you beam! Tabitha! It is, in David's view, life itself that is breaking through here, showing itself in its purest state.

Lena this afternoon.

She extricated her hand from Deniz's, momentarily disengaging herself from the straitjacket of the harrowing fate she had chosen, namely becoming the wife of this Muslim, and said in the language of the playwright: “Look, the stars, *de nacht zijn adem ingeslagen hebbende...* is it blood which murmurs here?”

Lena lit by a single spotlight. Pure beauty. Sublime being.

Lena Verbraeckel, twenty-one years old, ten years younger than his daughter. David has understood for some time that what she has awakened in him goes much further than yet another flirtation, however intense those can be. What she has awakened is a hunger that is unfamiliar to him, and at the same time she is the only one who can satisfy that hunger. The word “fulfilment” bounces up and down inside him. And “salvation,” yeah, that too. This Lena can save him from his false life, can teach him to start again. Perhaps it is love that he feels for her,

and not for the first time in his life he begins to wonder if he really knows it, love. Confusion all around, for what is it that is wrong with his life?

And then these damn nerves; they're almost suffocating him. Come on, keep pedalling.

First Oosterparkstraat. Almost all new houses with shops on the ground floor, and above that a bevy of semicircular balconies with plants, little tables, laundry. Women in head scarves or dressed in bright Hindu costumes. Men with moustaches, children with large, wide heads and thick black hair. The hospital is here, but the entrance seems to have moved elsewhere. An emaciated alcoholic with a long runny nose, whom he has asked nothing but who's talking to everybody, gestures energetically to him that he has to go there, in the Camperstraat "for hospital"; so he's got it wrong, although it looks like there had once been an entrance here. He rides around the buildings complex and comes to a cluttered sort of square with builders' skips and office trailers piled on top of one another, but the typical hospital hustle and bustle indicates that the entrance must be here, new, it would appear.

He chains his bike to a post.

"...give a final result. Just imagine that there's nothing wrong." A man in boxer shorts in a wheelchair.

"And we're going to stop with the pills. We should be happy we live on the ground floor." His wife. Both are smoking hand-rolled cigarettes, taking deep drags.

A corridor leads to the real entrance. People are coming and going. The visitors seem stricken with disease too; they've all got something: a limp, a strange posture, a face full of spots, lumps and bumps, an enormous swelling under a collapsed perm – at any rate, they're all so revoltingly ugly that you mustn't look too long. That applies even more to the patients, who further distinguish themselves by being in various stages of undress, as if they've just stepped out of bed, which they probably have. Here: a skinny man with grey, sunken cheeks, who has looked death in the eye. He is wearing a baseball cap over his drab stringy hair. His blue and white pyjama top hangs half open, and

under that a red striped pair of swimming trunks with gruesomely skinny legs sticking out of them and some sort of unlaced tennis shoes on his feet. Dents and black spots everywhere. He is pushing along a pole on which hangs a fluid-filled bag, connected to his body with tubes. And he is smoking. All the patients here smoke like maniacs, probably the reason for their nudist escapades. The blue clouds meander through the corridor, stinging David's eyes.

In the hall he decides to avoid the information desk and follow the sign pointing to Intensive Care. Because the sign is not repeated at the following intersection of hallways, he is already lost, but he hates to ask the way. He decides to turn right. Through the glass roof a bright light falls inside. At the Blood Laboratory people wait on birch chairs. Next to that is the Tranquillity Centre. Could it have been the chapel in the past, where you could pray? It is Catholic here after all, although a significant part of the current clientele are adherents of an Oriental religion. The door is locked, strange. Everything is still new; the hospital smell, a vague mix of medicine, Lysol and shit, is permeated by the odour of damp cement. Here and there workers push along scaffolding or stand on top of it to clip a bunch of wires that hang from the ceiling. In front of him stroll two large police officers, handcuffs jingling at every step. Between them walks a very small Mediterranean man with one eye sealed shut, who says, with a wry laugh, head up: "Izza strange, donna you think, always sending for me."

"Now, look here," says the policeman on the left, bending over to him amiably, "that's not quite the way it works."

They turn the corner by a coffee room, which is partitioned off by potted plants and looks blue from smoke. A lot of half-dressed people here too. A woman with a nightshirt, which has ridden up, offers an unabashed peek at her flabby seventy-year-old thighs. She is having difficulty rolling her cigarette. The head of a heavyset fellow with an open robe and a belly that is attempting to protrude through the buttons of his pyjamas is almost hidden in the clouds of smoke that he sucks out from his cigar. A doctor plops down on a chair for a moment for a quick cigarette, which he inhales deeply and regards attentively every time he takes it out of his mouth. In front of the elevator door a man in

green overalls with fluorescent light green shoulder pads stands next to a high trolley bearing a woman with a grey perm who looks cheerfully round, a member of a rather abundant subspecies: the they're-not-going-to-get-me-down type. They beam at you from their crutches or walkers equipped with hand brake. But the distressing subspecies dominates. Oh, how tortured that sixty-year-old looks in his wheelchair, not to say furious. The legs of his pants are rolled up; his own legs are decorated with bloody stripes, riddled with yellow tincture spots. His equally elderly life-partner, the hair on his neck boldly shaved against the growth, a gold chain with a cross in an open denim jacket, pushes him along. Male and female nurses dressed in green jogging suits shuffle along, talking animatedly, but fortunately two nurses in white are standing there, their underpants outlined against thin material, swinging the folders they are carrying back and forth with motions of their wrists, as if they were fans. They are not pretty. Doors open automatically and a bit further on signs claim that he is now in Pediatrics, which fits: there is the first child already, talking animatedly, holding her father's hand, carrying a doll. She is looking down, trying to imitate her daddy's big steps. A mother suddenly comes out of a door with a howling toddler in her arms, its face full of snot and tears. There is something the matter with its leg.

It is not here.

David decides to go back.

Blue with birch is the predominant characteristic of the house style; he registers. He passes a waiting area with chairs fixed to the tables. Three Moroccan women in headscarves are sitting round such one table with their daughters or nieces who are about sixteen and wearing exuberantly revealing outfits. Tabitha! Life doesn't let itself be caged. The swelling of the small breasts, the bare navel, the pinned-up hair with a loose curl that makes the neck so defencelessly naked – beautiful girls. A woman doctor, stethoscope hanging out of her jacket pocket, consults a list of names and calls one out, articulating slowly. A nurse walks past with an enormous bunch of balloons on a string. After open-sesame doors he sees a sign that says Intensive Care. Another such waiting room. High on the wall hovers a statue of a woman, a megaphone sticking out of her right ear. A listening

angel? Her left arm makes a gesture as if she were fending something off. Wanting to see nothing, having to hear everything – glad I'm not an angel, thinks David. When the elevator doors open a skinhead nurse first has to push out a trolley bearing a young man under crackling headphones, in whose slipstream is hidden a small dark woman, who beams at David, leaving behind a strong perfume, heavy with body odour and a trace of bad breath. Upstairs he walks into a narrow hallway. He hesitates for a moment by the expressionless sculpture put together out of three Giacometti figures, donated by the Keyzer family on the occasion of "the opening" in '95.

Dimmed light. She is sleeping, her head cocked to one side on the pillow. A tube runs out of her nose and also out of her left wrist. The pole with the IV drip stands next to the bed. Her other wrist is connected to a monitor that displays her heart rate. Her face is gaunt and there are two nasty nicks along the corners of her mouth, but it is unmistakably the face of his own mother, a fact he recognizes with a shock. Messy blond hair, partly put up. The mass under the thin covers is long and narrow.

His daughter.

And while his gaze wanders over her form, a feeling begins to impose itself upon him and words form like "bond" and "recovery." He doesn't understand it, but he is suddenly very calm and a great understanding descends inside him, a big strong bird, which settles on the branches of his spirit, folds its feathers, and says: I must save her.

I must save her.

Medically speaking at least, she has been saved, Wendy, the Surinamese nurse who has come to stand next to him, tells him so.

"No, no, no, she's sleeping. She was never really in a coma. Look, she's waking up."

Laura moans, straightens out her head and opens her eyes, blue-grey, strikingly like her mother's.

"Look who it is," says Wendy, lovingly brushing the hair from her forehead. Laura appears to be concentrating and finally locks her wandering gaze into that

of the man at the foot of her bed. Bald with dyed blond stubble. Not big, but heavy. A herringbone jacket with rolled up sleeves. White dress shirt with a red bow tie. Red braces. Baggy, grey flannel trousers.

“I’m... your father.”

Laura looks at him darkly for a short time and then, turning quizzically to Wendy, whispers hoarsely, “Where’s mum?”

She calls Anneke “mum” and not Anneke. Quite right too, all that modern business; it’s your child, not your friend. Does he think that? Yes, more or less. *Cogitationes libri sunt.*

“We couldn’t reach your mother, do you remember?” says Wendy. “I’ll try again in a minute. Then I’ll just take your little book for a minute, okay?”

Laura again turns her face towards David.

“I’m...David. David Oosterbaan. Is that your name too, or do you use Ter Haar?” A question he already knows the answer to. Confusion. She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. David nods.

“I’ll help you,” says David. His daughter closes her eyes. My daughter, he thinks.

“I’ll come again tomorrow,” he says.

Save, he thinks, I must save her. I must lead her back to the real world. It’s possible. She’s only thirty-one after all. She can still make a fresh start.

His eyes stumble over the bright light in the hallway. Those free thoughts of his whizz about, or to put it: there are no thoughts; there is only movement. He walks down the stairs and gets lost again. At a corner he bumps into a green monk with a light green hood on his head, who is pushing along a small cart with a large pale blue garbage bag on it, undoubtedly full of gory rags, afterbirths, organs and limbs. Flustered, he pushes past the smoking exhibitionists to the exit. Grey clouds with wisps of gauze in them, drift above his head,. “Oh no, I’m not taking him. He’s nothing but a bloody mess,” says a heavily moustachioed taxi driver with wavy hair. “Not in my cab,” he says as he gets behind the wheel again, leaving behind a bewildered old man with a wounded paw, hanging on the arm of a male nurse. “Asshole!” the nurse yells, sticking up his middle finger.

Helped by a wobbly rear wheel and a loose pedal his bicycle tries to shake him awake, but he remains in a light trance. He feels as if he has been shit out by the cloaca of the hospital, as if, to remain in the scatological sphere, he is being blown along by the farts of the Hospital of Our Lady, while he thinks only two things, “save her” and “a drink.” He is blown down the Ruyschstraat, almost getting run over on the Wibautstraat, and across the river, to the apparently unsafe harbour of Café Amstelvaart – not “mother’s womb” – where he raises his chalice in toast to the boy with the perm, though of course he means Gijs. No, the boy doesn’t know Gijs, but he did hear that something happened, to do with murder or something, and then David suddenly remembers the voice that called him that afternoon, by Tabitha – Where are you, David? But of course: Laura is Tabitha, risen from the dead, and although he’s no Peter, he will save her; he will lead her back to life. Can I have another beer?

And he thinks: if I save her, I’ll be saving myself.

It’s beyond comprehension, all of it.

Playing tonight in H. Hey, in H., in the Park Theatre, “the Park”, they used to say. At school he had already “played” in the Park, standing in a spotlight with Liesje Hulst in *The Apollo of Bellac* by Jean Giraudoux, directed by Jan Plekker, his first role. The Park. Well-scrubbed farmers with a small patch of silage around them. Hasn’t been “like that” for a long time. H. has become a suburb of Amsterdam. Nothing is “like that” anymore. And quite right too. Nostalgia is lost on David Oosterbaan. He comes from the east and is working his way through to the west. There is no looking back. Amstelvaart. No fishing grounds, no ice cream cart.

Yet he still goes to look for *The Apollo of Bellac* at home. He has no archive, no scrapbook, no shoe box with letters – he throws everything away. He doesn’t even have a bookshelf: what he wants to read he buys, and once he’s finished he gives it away. He only has a dictionary, the unabridged Van Dale, latest edition. Through the sort of experience that comes from bad luck and worse judgment, he keeps his “threatening letters,” as he calls all non-personal mail, in a corner of the

window sill, which is not to say he actually opens them. The only thing he keeps are photos of his characters – two shoe boxes worth – and the plays he has acted in. When he has found The Apollo of Bellac he puts it in his bag, for later in the bus. He wants to know what it was about again and who he was.

Nothing remains of us, he sighs once he has read the one-acter, for there was nothing about this airy bit of fluff that he remembered, except that he must have been the Apollo of Bellac, a fairy tale figure who advises Agnes, played by Liesje, to call all men who cross her path “handsome” in order to ensure her chances of success. After some practice on the telephone she tries the trick out on the gruff Messenger. When the Secretary General appears, Agnes says that he is as handsome as the Apollo of Bellac – a tip from her fairy tale guide. The Secretary General wants to hire her the next day. The members of the council trickle in and all of them bow before the storm. The President doesn’t know what is happening! “My messenger has become so polite that he even greets his own shadow on the wall.” The President falls for Agnes too and wants to trade in his ugly secretary, Miss Chèvredent – which they could have translated better as Goattooth – for her. Outraged, Goattooth summons the President’s fiancée, and Apollo steps out from his niche and holds forth on that beauty which is bound to its environment, provided that that environment is beautiful and willing to see beauty, and so the fiancée has to go. “Take him,” sneers the fiancée at Agnes, “if you like snoring at night.” “Do you snore?” says Agnes, “What a stroke of luck. The silence bothers me if I lie awake long.” Exit the President enraptured and David and Liesje in the spotlight for the finale. He must still have a photo of it, with Liesje trying to picture the beauty of the Apollo of Bellac with her eyes closed, even though he is standing in front of her in the form of David – a puzzling scene, whose feeling rather than its memory now steals over David: the heat of the spotlight, the slick forehead under his lips, the smell of greasepaint and, last but not least, the sounds from the auditorium, the public. An actor was born. Without an audience, no actor.

It suddenly occurs to him that there must have been a second one-acter after the intermission, something by Chekhov, with a meal in which his shamelessly

sissified portrayal of a servant had so won over the laughers that he heard Plekker chuckling in the wings, but his fellow cast members were furious. It must have been part of Maundy Thursday, when an inter-school athletics match was held which concluded with cultural events. The Park. He is curious to see if the enormous sets of the current production, with its planned three-dimensional effect, will be shown to advantage there.

The play is called *Is This England?*, by the thirty-five year old Dutch writer Albert Baden, who appears to enjoy some fame as a poet though David has never heard of him. Tom Blokdiik, Hollandia's dramaturge, had shown up with it, with an enthusiastic Lodewijk de Boer in his wake, who wanted to direct it, although, Lodewijk added, he had no idea how it should be done or if it was possible to do at all. Now *Is This England?* looked exceedingly playable as far as the individual scenes went, but it was by no means a well-made play; at the outset there was no rhyme or reason to it. Moreover there were thirty-five characters to divide among seventeen actors, plus exorbitant sets, plus the complete obscurity of the author: reason enough to spread out the risks of this production over two companies. Dok Waterzooij was enthusiastic after reading it because the madness of the play had a certain something in common with the other play he was working on at the time, and he offered the services of the theatre company The Direction/Bemoaned Harmonica (he himself was doing a stint as a guest-director in Frankfurt). Hollandia actually wanted to play on location and already had the Van Nelle Factory in Rotterdam in mind, but gave up on that idea when the Antwerp Theaterhuis offered to contribute to the financing of the production but then also demanded that the play be performed at their home theatre, indeed, that it must have its premiere there.

Is This England? was received with wild enthusiasm and completely panned, both without cause, something which occurs more and more frequently in those little columns in the papers where drama criticism has degenerated into the spirited little opinions of some. Apparently the positive side was dominant in the media, or else there was a feeling "that something was up" because the public turned out in reasonably large numbers, in H. too. The rehearsal period had been

exciting and a nice change of pace because Lodewijk de Boer had a looser, more improvised approach than Dok, who showed up with an armload of ideas every time, only to wind up empty-handed a week later. Hugo Koolschijn once told David the following anecdote about him. At The Apple they were doing a run-through of Pinter's *The Homecoming*. De Boer was sitting in the hall, but at a given moment they didn't see him there anymore. They continued to rehearse anyway. Afterwards they found him in a bar with a vodka. He had gone away, he said, because he found it so boring...He, the director, found it boring! In addition to that the collaboration with De Boer was intriguing for David in some sense because after all he had been one of his first heroes of theatre, with *Darts* and *Synode of Corpses*.

“Lo, that was Artaud, do you remember?”

“Yeah sure, and Noh drama, which I'd just seen in Japan, where we were touring with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. But it was all pretty much nonsense.”

To give an impression of David's present existence there follow here a few scenes: the lawn of an English country manor. Tea, croquet, the sound of tennis balls being hit, some of which occasionally roll onto the lawn, but above all: a background of city noises, telephones, printers, sirens, trams, snatches of music, which together suggest a nervous space.

David plays the role of Paul, “the man on his own,” involved in a quest for a kind of England, yearning for the love he rejects. For a proper understanding we should know that the whole performance is accompanied by a duo, two boys, twins, brothers, something like that, who hold the text, and occasionally prompt the actors. In passing, leafing through the text, they have already wondered aloud what the play was about. “We're waiting for something...” says the one. “Oh no!” cries the other. “And then later on we're going to have an accident for sure, the same old story: the roar of cars swelling on the speakers, squealing tyres, a crash, followed by the tinkle of broken glass. Silence.” “Oh, that silence,” concludes the other. That accident, said Albert Baden once during rehearsal, was a reference to Joseph Losey's film *Accident*. Oh.

According to Lodewijk de Boer the theme of the play is “mental

homelessness.” For that reason the second act, a masked ball on New Year’s Eve, takes place against a backdrop of tent canvas, which has come loose and is moving slowly in the wind. He also largely regards the play as music, not surprising for someone himself originally a musician. Tom Blokdijk called *Is This England?*, “a mental choreography, which seeks to transport us dionystically *while* at the same time appealing to our intelligence” and “a spectacle of a successive series of images which contradict, amplify, counterbalance, and generate each other.”