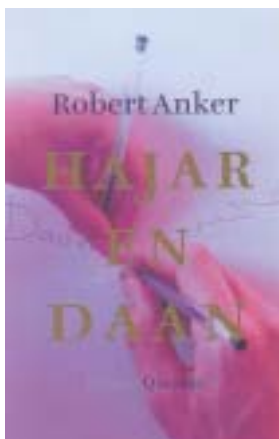


Robert Anker

## Hajar and Daan



**H**AJAR AND DAAN, a contemporary version of West Side Story written by Robert Anker, opens with 'The first time Daan Hollander, a history teacher at DataCare Secondary School in Amsterdam, fucked Hajar Nait Sibaha, a junior honors student, she kept her headscarf on – at his request.' The drama is introduced with such immediacy: forbidden love if ever there was one. Teacher/student, white/black, non-religious/Muslim, and it's as if the fucking is

about the annexation of a piece of land.

The DataCare College in Amsterdam owes its idiotic name to the generous gift from the chief sponsor Jimmy Pretzel, who, apart from being a long-time friend of Daan's, has made it in the world of IT. Daan seems spineless and weak from the outset, indulging in a joint between classes. But his passion for Hajar turns out to be much deeper than even he expected. As the story unfolds, Daan shakes off his ambivalent attitude and does everything in his power to win Hajar's love.

Anker takes a tongue-in-cheek look at a contemporary subject. In part, he writes a psycho-realist novel about a teacher who gets caught up in the web of an unattainable love for a seventeen-year old Moroccan student, and this story provides him with the opportunity to look ironically at the world of teaching as well as the artists' scene of Daan's old friends. At the same time, as is obvious from the classic opening sentence, Anker is playing a post-modernist game with an all-knowing narrator observing Daan and his good intentions.

In *Hajar and Daan*, Anker has written an engaging love story and a blunt portrait of our times.

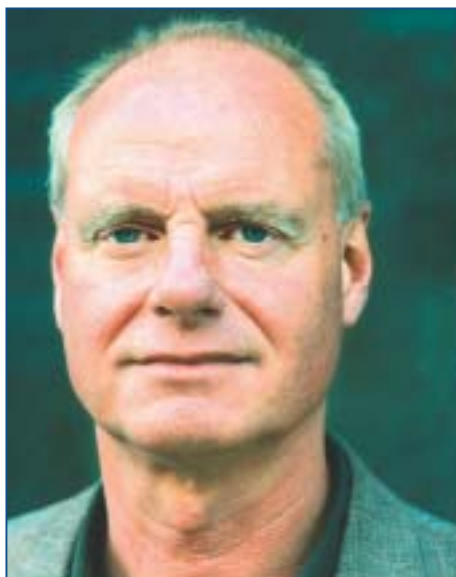


photo Klaas Koppe

Robert Anker, writer, poet, critic and Dutch teacher, was born on 27 April 1946 in Oostwoud. He debuted as a poet with *Waar ik nog ben* (Where I am, 1979). After publishing several more books of poetry, he made his debut as a novelist with *De thuiskomst van kapitein Rob* (Captain Rob's Homecoming, 1992). *Twee novellen en een brief* (1992) received the F. Bordewijk prize. His first big novel, *Vrouwenzand* (1998), is the portrait of a generation as well as that of a man wondering whom he has become and where he comes from. In 2002 his novel, *Een soort Engeland* (Kind of England, 2001) which is placed in the theatre world, received the Libris Prize for Literature. Robert Anker lives and works in Amsterdam.

*A sizzling, almost salacious book.*

DE VOLKSKRANT

*This man can write (...) Robert Anker has managed in this grand novel to broach the subject that has politics in the Netherlands completely confused and reduce it to a doomed love story between a Dutch man and a Moroccan girl.*

ALGEMEEN DAGBLAD

*A stylistically cunning work. Anker writes rhythmical prose, mixes long, meandering sentences with short ones, all the while switching energetically between the present and the future.*

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**Sample translation from**

*Hajar and Daan* by Robert Anker  
(Amsterdam: Querido, 2004)

**Translated by S.J. Leinbach**

A Plucky Girl

The first time Daan Hollander, a history teacher at Data Care Secondary School in Amsterdam, fucked Hajar Nait Sibaha, a junior honors student, she kept her headscarf on – at his request. Actually it wasn't quite like that. He was still struggling with the condom when she pushed him backwards onto his bed so his head landed among the teddy bears. She had put a knee to his left and a foot to his right and lowered herself onto him with maddening deliberation. She began moving at that same slow pace, stopping for a moment to yank Winnie the Pooh out from under his head. And then she started again, compelling him, gently slapping his cheek, to look at her. It was as if she were searching for something, as if she wanted to catch him at his essence. Grunting loudly as he came, he saw her lips curl into an amused smile, which stayed there as he rolled over on top of her. He traced her eyebrows with his middle finger. They began as a dot, expanded into a graceful arc and ended in a point, like the Arabic *faa*, but upside-down; coal-black eyebrows which looked as if they had been stuck onto her olive skin. And underneath them: round, black eyes with lids like Romanesque arches. He ran his fingers over the slightly curved nose and leapt from the tip to the upturned edge of her upper lip. Apparently that tickled, because she shuddered and pushed him away.

‘Where did you get that?’ asked Hajar (Hah-zyar), nodding at the poster on the wall opposite the bed. Naomi Campbell, who had forgotten to button the top button of her Diesel pants. The white shirt she was wearing didn’t have any buttons at all; the two ends were simply tied together. Sprightly navel.

‘Swiped it from a bus shelter. A friend of mine had the key.’

When she entered his apartment, she had stood still in surprise. A wide, deep house with no interior walls, although closer inspection revealed this little bedroom hiding in the back left corner. Sunk into an addition to the right of the front door was a gleaming stainless steel kitchen, but apart from that, it was just one big room, with a gigantic white bed (9 ft X 12 ft) as pièce de résistance. The bed was covered with a sort of fleece of soft, white wool. It was full of pillows, in various sizes but all white, and scattered on top of it were glossy magazines and a few Donald Duck comics. In the meantime Daan had walked in and started pressing various buttons, causing the room to become suffused with a soft pastel light (even though the sun was still out), sea-green underwater pop music and a barely perceptible aroma, something with vanilla in it – or was that just her imagination?

‘That’s right,’ said Daan, pointing to a transparent plastic devise which was filled with water and blowing out little chains of soap bubbles. The walls were painted in gentle hues, soft orange fading to pink fading to yellow. Large colour photographs on gleaming panels. To her left, sliding around between the wall and the ceiling was a woman’s face, which continuously melted into another face – or were there just two of them, back and forth? She followed the light and discovered a beamer.

Hajar slowly walked in. To her right was a glass table with the latest Apple computer on it. One chair, another one against the wall. Here and there, rows of white leather or plastic cubes. For sitting on? A thin metal bookcase, glass shelves full of CDs and video tapes. Next to the wall across from the bed was an inflatable chair made of transparent plastic. On the ground in front of it was a pink television set which was showing MTV on mute – a big black rapper kept

looming towards them, gesturing as if he was hurling something at the camera. Behind the TV, a rotating vase with large, orange-coloured flowers in it. They looked like the beaks of exotic birds – fake?

‘Real,’ said Daan. ‘I buy them every week here at the shopping centre. What do you think?’

What could she think? She had never seen anything like it. All she could think of was the lobby of a hotel, or a restaurant, but without tables. And what was this? She stopped in front of a large, oblong mirror, but something wasn’t right, and now she saw it, or rather, she didn’t see it: her reflection. She was missing from the mirror. As was Daan, when he came to stand next to her. He explained that it was a photograph of the room as it would look if she weren’t standing in front of the mirror. And that you could move twice.

‘?’

‘If you move to a new apartment, the trick doesn’t work anymore, of course. So then she takes another picture (it’s a ‘she’). Of your new place, get it?’

She got it. Or rather, she didn’t get it at all. Art was something she had never given a moment’s thought to. She was seventeen years old, she was Moroccan; maybe that had something to do with it too. She had heard of Rembrandt and Van Gogh, of course. Once she had gone to the Amsterdam Museum of Modern Art on a field trip. The thing she remembered most was the big staircase in the centre of the building and the enormous, monochromatic paintings that she had to sit in front of with the rest of the class and listen to the teacher lecture about. Tea. Yes, she would like a cup of tea.

Daan rummaged around in the kitchen, wondering if anybody had seen them just now. He lived in the Amsterdam Gate, the biggest shopping complex in the south-eastern part of the city, and the Gate was a favourite hangout of his students. At the end of the school day, he had walked out onto the courtyard of Data Care Secondary School, putting his foot on a small bench under the big, bare sycamore to check if he had left his pocket calendar in the teacher’s lounge (it certainly wouldn’t have been the first time). After he had done so (yeah he had

it) and shut the bag again, the taut black leather Gucci he had treated himself to last week, he heard the rattling of a bicycle chain: Hajar Nait Sibaha, who was unlocking her white racing bike from the rack. He looked at his watch, a waterproof multi-coloured sphere which looked more like a landmine than a timepiece with all its knobs and buttons, and saw that the last period had ended more than forty-five minutes ago.

‘Hey there, Hajar.’

‘Hi, Mr. H.’

Mr H. Daan just couldn’t get used to that. Since they had start admitting vo-tech studies students four years ago, the school had undergone a general dumbing down, and even the senior honours students were calling him ‘Mr H.’, whereas they used to call him ‘Daan.’ He remembered a junior a few years back who had called him ‘Mr Hollander’ by accident. The whole class had burst out laughing, and the kid turned beet-red.

‘You’re late, Hajar.’

‘So are you, Mr H.’

Daan walked to his bicycle. Because it had promised to be a sunny February day that morning – promise kept (but by whom?) – he had taken his mountain bike out for a spin for the first time. It was a eye-catching machine, entirely chrome-plated. He wasn’t much of a cyclist, but he had bought the Giant in September because, well, because the thing was just begging to be bought. The ride from Amsterdam Gate to Muiderkade in the east of the city had gone well, though his cheeks tingled from the cold. By the time he reached the schoolyard and dismounted, everything was hurting. It was between periods, and he was immediately surrounded by a group of boys. ‘Nice bike, Mr H.’ ‘My brother’s got one just like it.’ ‘*Your* brother? He must have stolen it.’ ‘Shut up, man.’ ‘No, you shut up, man.’ Daan waved them aside with his gloves and limped to the roofed-in rack that was reserved for faculty.

‘Cool bike, Mr H.’

‘Yeah, it’s nice, isn’t it? You going my way?’ Hajar lived on Steve Biko Square. He knew that because he was her mentor.

Big no-no.

Never get yourself into a situation where you’re alone with a student, someone had said not long ago in the teachers’ lounge, it’ll only lead to trouble. If I have something to discuss with them, I leave the door to my room open, said Kluzinski, a musty old man, his stinky dog Sopke on his lap. As if that man had an ounce of sex appeal for his young charges, with his long, stringy hair combed over his bald pate, which stood on end at the slightest draft, like a cartoon character who has just gotten the fright of his life; with his dandruff covered shoulders, his rumpled jacket, his low-hanging crotch (if there was one thing Daan hated, it was people who were poorly dressed). In the past this same Kluzinski had been a notorious ass-grabber. That was way back when Daan himself was a student here. There had always been problems with Klunzinski. Sexual harassment, not that the word existed at the time. Or take his crony, Klos (Kluzinski and Klos were as inseparable as Laurel and Hardy). He would drop his pen in front of girls with skirts; that was when girls still wore skirts. And on a day like today, he would open the window, so the chilly spring air would rush in and cause the girls’ nipples to stand to attention. Whenever they had a test in Klos’s class, they would make sure that busty Jacqueline sat in front of his desk, with her top buttons unbuttoned, Elma van Duinhoven had said recently in study hall. Jacqueline had nodded in agreement.

Daan hung his bag over the handlebars of his bike. Riding alongside each other at a relaxed pace, they passed the local hospital, though Daan was pedalling four times as fast as Hajar on account of the gear he had chosen. They rode through a red light and entered the East Park quarter.

‘Oh, my dearest,’ Hajar would later write, ‘there is honey under your tongue, and myrrh and aloe; the bees of my heart will know how to find you. Must I gird myself against you? Cover my head before you, to reach out to you now on my bed? I have sought you in the night, my Beloved, I sought you, but I did not find

you. Oh come hither, my Love, come hither that I may look upon you in my lofty dwelling! I am a wall and my breasts are as towers, but for you my court is open. Make haste, my Dearest! Find me in the court and in the meantime imprint me like a seal upon your heart.'

Hajar with a headscarf. He could no longer remember what she had looked like without it. A modern, no-frills headscarf, to be sure, pulled tight over the ears and knotted at the back. But still. He had asked her to come see him during one of his mentoring periods. Would she mind closing the door? (I know, I know, Kluzinski.) His ears were buzzing from jetlag, but not just from jetlag. He had gotten back from Thailand the day before, where he had spent the Christmas break on the beach of Hat-Rin, dancing to techno by the breakers, occasionally taking one of the pills he had smuggled along, until the big red sun shot out of the ocean, the last vodka on the rocks had been consumed with 'a couple of valia' (Jim) and he wandered back to his beach hut with Dunja, a twenty-three-year-old piece of ass, blond dreadlocks, a husky voice, a tight little butt in bikini bottoms, and a belly button, round and deep as...well, you can make up your own simile.

He sat with one buttock on a desk, his arms crossed, looking at the figure in front of him. Hajar's eyes were looking downward, her piercing eyes, so dark that it seemed as if the black of the irises was leaking into the gleaming white. Arab eyebrows, Arab nose. Full mouth, with an upturned upper lip which made it look as if she was sneering at him, or lost in thought or... kissing. From the very beginning, he hadn't been able to take his eyes off that mouth. Or that nose and those leaky eyes with the Romanesque arches above them. But now that they were lowered, her face had become a countenance, a sculpture, virginal and serene, cut from African ivory, smuggled to the coast with camels from distant oases. The white headscarf glowed in the cold January air. She was playing nervously with her hands.

'All of a sudden you've started wearing a headscarf. That seems like quite a change. I mean, uh, as your mentor...'

'It was time I started. It had to happen some time.'

‘Says who?’

‘Says me.’

‘No pressure from uh...home?’

‘Home?’ She raised her eyes (oh, those eyes!). Stupid question, he knew that as soon as he asked. Hajar Nait Sibaha had lost her mother four years ago. She had two older sisters who lived in Brussels and Utrecht and a brother, Khalid, who had dropped out of school three years ago. She was taking care of Khalid (Khah-leed), whenever he wasn’t incarcerated, that is. Her father was a businessman, always on the road.

‘You know what a ...what does the headscarf mean to you?’

‘It protects me, as a girl. Men leave me alone.’

‘Yes, Moroccan men maybe, they can be a bit... anyway. But Dutch men? They’re not that bad, are they? It’s only normal.’

‘Normal?’ She suddenly looked at him.

‘Yes, normal. If you’re a good-looking woman, like yourself, men are going to look at you. You’d think it strange if they stopped. You probably wouldn’t like that; women probably wouldn’t like that, not getting any more attention.’

‘Isn’t that up to me to decide?’ she whispered. ‘Please?’

‘Do you know what a headscarf means, Hajar? Let me tell you. It mean: hands off, this is my wife, my daughter, my property. A headscarf confirms the inferior position of the Muslim woman.’

‘I’m nobody’s property. Can I go now?’

Daan didn’t answer and toyed with his fingers.

‘It’s a sign of my faith.’

‘So why don’t men wear a sign, a cap or something, a fez?’

‘It means I belong to something. To my culture. It gives me support. Then I’m not alone.’

When they reached the turn-off for Steve Biko Square, Hajar showed no sign of going left. Daan had shifted into another gear, and now he was pedalling towards Nobel Road at the same rate as Hajar. It was not nearly as chilly as it had

been that morning. Did he know who Steve Biko was? No, he didn't actually. Did she? Yes, Steve Biko was a South African who fought against apartheid. She chattered non-stop about the neighbourhood. About the annoying boys who did nothing but play football, though sometimes she joined in with them. In the summer she would often play with her girlfriends by the water of the Ring Canal, which they had just ridden over. No, not all of her friends were Moroccan, not by a long shot; some were Turkish or Surinamese, and there was one girl from Ghana. They went fishing there too. You could catch those squirmy, white, glistening little fish that were slightly slimy to the touch. And in the evening it was great in the square with the mothers sitting together talking and the girls running around playing hide-and-seek in the lamplight. A little creepy, but fun. The shops were often still open, and the fluorescent light would spill out over the vegetables and apples and pears displayed in the trays outside. Yeah, sure, she sometimes stole an apple. After her mother's death she did the housework – who else would? Khalid? A loud laugh with a high-pitched ring. He had heard it before. It was contagious, although in some way it was not meant for him, that laugh. Even as her mouth was moving a mile a minute, it was as if her thoughts were miles away. Daan looked at her, how she rode alongside him, her eyes on the road. The nose and mouth made her look proud. He thought her brave in some way, or better yet, plucky. A plucky girl. So alone in the world. She was wearing a red nylon windbreaker, not the obligatory long black jacket worn by most of the headscarf girls. Blue jeans that hugged her buttocks (beautiful buttocks, he had seen that straight off; that was always the first thing he noticed, along with the face). Her old racing bike had a crossbar. Had it been Khalid's? No, it was her own. On her neck a few hairs had slipped out of her scarf. That might have been the most beautiful part of a woman's body: the bare neck. But without the headscarf, please. Hastily put up hair.

Daan had made somewhat half-hearted objections to the headscarf – sign of oppression, backwards culture, blah blah blah – but more than anything, he thought it was a shame for the girl, especially a girl like that. Or a shame for him,

to be more precise. Like all men, he felt that all those beautiful young women out there, floating freely in the public sphere, were his, that he was entitled to them, to have, to cherish. And to fuck, of course – ‘bed material, every one of them’ – mumbled Daan, using one of Jimmy’s expression’s. Yes, the Pleistocene was still regularly emitting signals from the brain stem: woman as ‘piece of ass’. But it is one of the ironies of contemporary life that women were now using exactly the same words for men – will we ever understand it? Daan had always had a lot of girls in his life, he would check out the new classes for beauty, although he didn’t go as far as that weirdo math substitute they had had last year who had said during his first coffee break that ‘there were some fine-looking girls in this place’. He was right about that, but a glance at his roster revealed that he had just had two classes of freshmen. Freshmen! They were still just kids! Daan’s hormones only started raging when they were about sixteen – those girls.

Hajar had turned seventeen on September 12. Sweet seventeen.

On the first school day in September he had graded a few holiday assignments and proctored a resit. Basje Verlaat wanted to be admitted to the college prep programme, and Daan let him in. You had to screw things up pretty bad before Mr H. would flunk you. Mr H. felt that a student who had to retake an exam should give it a shot. He said. The other members of staff gave him a hard time about it at staff meetings. The chairman said: I propose that so-and-so retake the history exam. A colleague said: Aw, Daan, can’t you just give the kid a grade now? The point was that he didn’t want to be the bad guy. He avoided conflicts like the plague. In his heart of hearts he couldn’t have cared less. If the mentor wanted him to change a student’s final grade from an F to a D-, he would do it. Sure, that F was the average of all the grades the student had earned that whole year, but if things had been a little different, that 64 (F) could have easily been a 65 (D-), so – feigning a look in his pocket calendar – okay, that’s fine. This had earned them a reprimand from Pé Wessels, who had even put it on the agenda of the next S(taff) M(eeting): under no circumstance should a student’s final grade be altered.

Kluzinski, his neighbour across the hall: 'It's absurd that nowadays these kids cheer when they get a 65. For them it's enough to get a pass. When you hand back a test, they whip out their calculators to figure out if their new average will be high enough for them to get a 40 or 50 next time. That saves them from doing any work for a while. They don't even look at the test; they just crumple it up as soon as they see the grade. And if you try to talk to them about their work, all they ever say is that their answer was kind of right too. I haven't returned a test in years; I just give them their grades.' Things used to be different. Often the teacher would give a final grade that was not the arithmetic average of a student's marks for the semester, but a grade that grew out of the emotional and intuitive consideration of all the grades that had been earned, and that could sometimes deviate by as much as five percentage points from the true average.

Kluzinski: 'That way you could see that some students lacked an honours mentality, whether they had a 3.8 GPA or not.'

Yeah, those were the days, before teachers became mentors. The mentor, Ruut Garjeanne said not long ago, spends most of his time with students who are going to get held back or drop out of school. So let 'em! If students had a problem with the administration or another teacher they could come to him. He immediately passed on more serious cases to the coordinator or the guidance counsellor or the drop-in centre – the school was one big safety net, but did it help? In Daan's opinion all those kids just quietly disappeared from school; Ruut was right.

Right, so Basje would be entering his sophomore year as a college prep student. He would probably end up repeating the year because he never did a lick of work. Daan picked up his schedule for the 1998-99 school year at the main office and slipped the provisional class lists into it. He did not copy the names into the book until after the first month, when there were no more changes to the schedule. Changes meant that some names would have to be scratched out and others added, which in turn meant a chance of putting the wrong grade next to the right name, or vice versa. A lot of foreign names, about half of them. Since they started admitting students with no college aspirations, the school had gotten

progressively less Dutch. At an open day in the spring, one of the parents, a dark-skinned Surinamese man, had said that there were far too many ‘black kids’ at the school, so he was going to pull his daughter out and send her to a ‘white school’. ‘You’d better not send her to the Reformed Lyceum since they already have a Ne-gro,’ Phreek Hemel had crowed. Phreek was a flaming fairy and said whatever he pleased. ‘But we should be proud of our school,’ he had added. ‘We help black kids get a genuine diploma, which they’d *never* be able to get any place else, am I right or am I right?’ Good old Phreek, always a laugh.

In the afternoon there was an SM, which non-faculty members (NFMs) were invited (forced?) to attend. Lena from the main office was there most of the time. Leo, the custodian, was not; he had enough power as it was. Some claimed, not without a touch of bitterness, that he was even more powerful than the principal. During the meeting Daan played hangman or tic-tac-toe with Joop, the phys-ed teacher, who had taught him when he had been a student here. Joop Nassipooti, as he liked to be called. ‘It means white rice,’ he would say and burst out laughing, as he pointed to his dark Moluccan skin. The next day there were all kinds of introductions for the incoming freshmen, but also for the returning students, albeit on a smaller scale. It was also that day the students came to pick up their books from their mentor. Had he already seen Hajar then? He couldn’t remember, not even now, now that he was nothing but memories.

On the first day of classes he was already puttering around his classroom on the third floor at quarter past eight – little short of a miracle since Daan Hollander was a notorious latecomer. The sun stood above the trees in the park, poised to shine right in the teacher’s eyes and blind him, so the teacher in question took the precaution of lowering the blinds, which bathed the room in a red glow. Daan’s cabinet must have been shoved around a few times during vacation because when he opened it, a considerable portion of its contents poured out onto the floor. Shit! A pile of old tests slid under the desks, and he had to pick them up one by one. And into the trash they went. A bulletin board hung on the wall next to the cabinet. It had been put up during the reign of his predecessor, who had taken ER

(early retirement) eight years ago. Five years later, he had gone into PR (permanent retirement), poor guy. At that time it had been full of recent newspaper clippings, maps and caricatures of politicians, next to spectacularly yellowed photos of historical events. Since Daan had been working there, it had become a place for images that would have more appeal for his students: a fold-out picture of a Ferrari Testa Rossa, photos of Madonna on stage and a backlit Brad Pitt, an advertisement for Versace's new bikini line, a tropical beach with a bottle of Bacardi half buried in the sand, and a mini-poster with a goggle-eyed cartoon figure withdrawing from the bright red opening of an inflatable sex doll, with the words: 'What!? Oh, not again. Three times is my limit.' The maps against the left wall, which showed the borders of the Roman Empire in 44 BC and those of the Third Reich in AD 1944, had been already hanging there when he was a student here.

Everything had been thoroughly cleaned during vacation. The floors had been waxed, and the graffiti removed from the desks, except for what had been scratched in (in the back left corner: 'TIM!', declaration of love or imprecation, was there to stay). During the school year very little cleaning was done. The coming of the vo-tech crowd and the decision to become independent from the municipality had not improved the situation, and the financial sponsorship all went to the computer room and media lab. Two years ago the students went on strike because their toilets were too filthy to be used (they had improved marginally after that). Daan tried to keep his own room fairly tidy. That is to say, he would sometimes punish a student by sending him to the custodian's office to get a rag and a spray can and remove the stains, the cunts and the pricks, the names of pop groups and brief messages like 'Fuck Ajax' or 'Allah!' or 'P loves Rinie'.

Beneath, behind and inside the radiators and behind the cabinet, a small mountain of junk had been piling up over the summer holiday: scrap papers, crib sheets, tests that had been crumpled up in anger, ballpoint pens (or in most case, ballpoint pen shards), springs from ballpoint pens, gnawed pencils, candy

wrappers, crushed cola cans, plastic soft drink bottles stained with sticky orange remnants, grimy pencil cases, triangles for geometry, twisted paperclips and plastic bags with mouldy bread inside. Sometimes, in ‘the inspiring silence during a test’ (Frank Achterstraatje), he would see mysterious gauzy balls of white mould being blown across the floor by a draft. That inspiring silence was not what it was cut out to be, considering that a number of chairs resisted every movement with a loud squeak.

The bell.

Brownian motion. Five hundred kids bounded out of the classroom, dancing and running down the halls. Five hundred throats, yelling, laughing, shrieking and screaming. The vo-tech girls in particular were big on yelling: like those four chicks over there, standing around with clenched fists, screaming their lungs out, to-tally idiotic. Pushing and shoving, the students carried their book bags up the large staircase in the corner that connected the two wings of the building. When they got to the second floor, they streamed into the classrooms, or if they had to go even higher up, they surged to the ends of the wings, where a narrower staircase led to the third floor, to room 20, for example, on the south side of the building, where Daan held court. His third-year honour students trickled in, a new class, though there were many familiar faces. But regardless he would have to relearn what name went with what face. There were twenty-six of them. History was popular and Daan even more so.

A girl with brown-black curls stopped at his desk with an outstretched hand: ‘Hi. I’m Hajar, and this is Safinur,’ pulling another girl towards her who giggled shyly. Daan said hello and absent-mindedly accepted the hand he was offered. He was distracted by the navel that was winking at him at eye-level from under a short sweater. Oh Jesus, the way that belly bulged out slightly and then retreated into the hip huggers. She sat down right in front of him. The Moroccan girl wrote something on a note and passed it to her neighbour. Daan saw that she was left-handed. He could write with his left hand, very neatly too, but only backwards. He had spent a lot of time practising. He could also do it with both hands

simultaneously, with the left hand going left, and the right hand going right. He would sometimes do it on the blackboard, his name for example, with squeaking pieces of chalk moving in opposite directions, to torment the kids with that blood-curdling noise. Daan made spelling mistakes on the board, and sometimes his students would point them out to him. The truth was he had actually never learned to spell, and he was not the only one. Olaf Gianotte, vice principal, was another: ‘But this doesn’t mean however that the oversight goes unnoticed.’  
But/however: tautology.

The first day of a new school year meant that the class, which had changed over the summer – some students had left, while others had taken their place – had to look for new positions, at least in this room (in another room, they sat in very different places). They called out, waved to one another, scraped their chairs along the floor. They sat down. Coats on, book bags on their desk. Half of them were facing backwards, talking to the other half.

‘All right, guys,’ said Daan, raising his voice. ‘Who has a speech today?’

Most of them turned around. Speech? What’s he talking about? It’s only the first class, man. Do you have to give speeches in history? No way, man. Of course not, man. You’re so gullible. The noise died down a bit, and that was the idea.

‘Listen, I understand it’s annoying when I have to talk over you guys, so I suggest you all shut up. Okay?’ He let that sink in for a minute. Everyone was quiet so he could explain the ‘house rules’. When you came in you took your coat off. Caps and headscarves were permitted because that’s the style now (no one reacted). Bags on the ground, books on the table. No trips to the bathroom, except during a double period. You could eat, as long as you didn’t smack your lips, you could sleep as long as you didn’t snore, and you could use crib sheets as long as Daan didn’t see it. He only gave *one* (he stuck up his middle finger) warning. Hesitant laughter. An incomplete homework assignment meant a ‘negative entry’ in Daan’s Book of Naughty and Nice – he held up his pocket calendar. Each negative entry meant a tenth of a point off your final grade. Indignant groaning.

‘Oh yeah, I’m a lot meaner than I look.’ The groans were replaced by hesitant laughter and nods of agreement. ‘But a small donation to the Be-Nice-to-Daan-Fund will do wonders.’ He wrote his bank account number on the blackboard. Confusion, raised eyebrows.

‘If you’re late, don’t bother seeing if I’ll let you in, because I won’t, and then you’ll be disturbing me twice. Go right to the main office and get a blue card and see if I let you in.’ Mild commotion.

‘Read what it says on the card: Joe Blow requests permission to be admitted to class, right? A request can be denied.’

And so on. He gave the dates for tests for the next three months. There would also be pop quizzes in-between. Or so he said, but he rarely gave them, because they was just another thing to grade. Sighs could be heard. Daan noticed that a number of the students were not writing anything down. This was clearly a recent trend. Honours students were degenerating into college preppers. Come test time, a good handful of them didn’t even have a pen. ‘Wait a minute, man.’ ‘I’m not a man, and I’m not going to wait. ‘But I don’t have a pen!’ And needless to say, the college prep students were becoming more like the vo-tech crowd. And that was the source of the trouble. The vo-tech kids were pulling everyone down to their level. Why? Because the teachers made sure that no more than one-quarter of all the tests were failing grades. Otherwise it meant war with the students and grief from the administration, since ‘anyone who’s been admitted to this school should be able to do the work’.

Oh well.

Daan called out the names to see which face went with them. He urged them, begged them almost, to correct his pronunciation. They couldn’t have cared less what he called them, but *he* did. He didn’t want to call Tugrul Took-rool, if it was actually Too-rool, or Imane Ee-*mah*-nay instead of *Ee*-men, but these kids would let you say it wrong all year long, although they would sometimes flash each other a significant grin, as if to say: what a loser. That was something they excelled at, grinning, and it always made Daan unsure of himself. Your name is

part of you, he would sometimes bellow at them. They exchange wide-eyed looks: this guy is definitely not all there. Right, where was he...Hadge-ar Nait Sibaha...?

‘Hahz-yar.’

Stupid, she had just said that a minute ago, of course, but at the time his mind happened to be elsewhere. The fluorescent light flickered on. A gift from Jimmy. If a sensor did not register any movement for a few minutes, the light would go out. After the school day, or in classrooms where the teachers keep strict order. But there was no order to speak of here. The kids were chatting and moving around in their seats. But it still seemed as if the light had come on. Not that anyone noticed.

He fixed his gaze on the black, leaky eyes in front of him, and what he did not know yet was that he would never be able to tear himself away from them. Or rather, he did know, because his body knew: something was quivering and shimmering which had yet to reach his mind. When he saw her mouth with its curling kiss, when he saw the proud nose, her slightly tinted oasis-cool skin, the brown-black curls, the stuck-on eyebrow, which was an upside-down fffaa. Hajar Skin and Hajar Hair were fluid, slipping inside him, slowly but surely gaining control of him by damming up his flowing entity so he could silt up against her constancy, her charm, against all the things he did not yet know, but which his body recognised at once. Or was it his soul? Or was there even a difference? The soul does not need more than the nod of a head, the bend of an arm to know where it must be – her sandaled feet, or the curves of her hips, to paraphrase the Song of Songs.

‘Hahz-yar.’ A voice that jingles like her bracelets, which had been hammered from silver from the medina. And she?

‘Gazing out the windows, peering through the lattices,’ she would write years later, ‘I say it in the words of this place, Dearest, in the language of our bitter joy that broke free from the silence, now that my soul calls down from the mountaintop that it yearns to go to the Mountain. And I tell you that my soul

recognised you before I gave you my hand that first time. It pushed my hand towards you, it saw its destiny and its fate, the shackles and the snares, and a short time later it saw nothing but a fog, but that fog was a voice that cried out to it, as the muezzin cries out to the faithful, and it turned toward your voice, as the faithful towards the mihrab in the mosque, and it took your voice and your eyes, which are as doves by the river, and since then you have been a bundle of myrrh which slumbers betwixt my breasts.’

A lecture about the Enlightenment. That was how Daan always started off the year with the juniors, even though they had had the material before. ‘One of the Grand Narratives of Western man, children. By Narrative, I mean a coherent bundle of facts and ideals that give life meaning. The Enlightenment is the great Narrative that came after Christianity. A narrative we can be proud of, because it brought us to where we are today, because it will never lose its legitimacy. The Western culture is the global culture of the future, and that is the culture of the Enlightenment, although we’ll still have to talk about Romanticism in some detail. The story of the Enlightenment,’ said the peripatetic Daan, who was having a hard time avoiding all the bags as he walked around the room. ‘Open your notebook, cock your pens, because everything will be used against you in six weeks.’

You could say a lot about Daan Hollander, but he was not someone you’d ever accuse of being an intellectual. Last year he had gone for in-service training (compulsory – sigh), and it was there that he picked up the post-modern philosophical concept ‘The Grand Narrative’. Maybe it also had to do with the fact that he had decided to study history – after much hesitation – because he loved a good story. His elementary school teacher Mr Jos could spin spellbinding yarns about the heroic deeds of the Dutch in the Eighty Years’ War, and in his freshmen and sophomore years he had the good fortune of having classes with Ruut Garjeanne, who could conjure up the darkness of ancient Egypt before your very eyes. He let you ride along on Hannibal’s elephants and let the swords of Charlemagne’s vassals clatter in his classroom. Daan had liked reading the stories

too, as a boy, but that was very different from Lyotard's Grand Narrative. Lyotard, who demonstrated that many of our civilisation's stories were now bankrupt or at least seriously weakened, that the Grand Narratives of Reason and Humanity had bought the farm in Auschwitz, that Brotherhood had gotten lost in the capitalist excrescence called globalisation and that the Narrative of Multiculturalism was in danger of drowning in slums and stagnating integration. Why don't you tell them that, Daan, or didn't you know? Don't you read the papers? Weren't you paying attention at the seminar? Why don't you add that to your empty sermon about the Enlightenment!

After a brief skirmish about absent pens and paper, everyone was ready; these were honours students, after all. In the college prep classes, a substantial number of the students would slouch down in their chairs, with nothing on their desks, apparently listening to the teacher; at least in Daan's class, since he demanded – 'Just humour me' – they look as if they are paying attention. If someone was chatting to his neighbor and claimed to be listening, Daan would tell him he didn't give a damn, the point was to convince *him* that he was listening. Ah, college prep. If, at a certain point, he said that they had to write something down because it was definitely going to be in the test, they would sigh, score a pen and copy three disconnected concepts from the blackboard onto a sheet of paper that they had torn out of someone else's notebook. Less than an hour later the sheet of paper would flutter onto the floor of another classroom, to land among the orange peels under the radiator. Daan had once fished out one such paper with his thumb and index finger. Between the creases and streaks of dirt, he could make out: 'Montequeui Tria Politica Encyclopaedia'.

It wasn't that bad with the honours students yet, with the exception of Youssef and Nilgün, who were more interested in each other, but that was normal. From the beginning he had seated them as far away from each other as possible. It would never last, a Turk and a Moroccan, even though they had Islam in common.

If a talkative student asked to go to the bathroom, Daan would say, ‘Yes. And take your time.’ That was another one of Phreek’s.

‘The Enlightenment has nothing to do with Philips.’ He always tried to work that line in somewhere. ‘The word refers to the light of reason illuminating the dark reaches of the mind. It all started in the Renaissance. What does that mean again? (Rebirth, everybody knew that, but nobody knew of what.) Right, classical antiquity, which they recognised the mentality from. And now we’re getting to the heart of the matter: this was a mentality that put man at the centre of things, and that is exactly what happened around the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. God was pushed into the periphery. You can see it in paintings of the adoration of the Christ child by the shepherds. The shepherds themselves are depicted in the centre with their big hands and heads, and the little baby, God himself, and his mother are way off on the edge of the canvas. Does everyone know who the baby Jesus was? What about our Muslim brothers and sisters? He was one of your prophets, right?’ Nope, nobody knew. The most comprehensive answer was ‘something with a cross’, so first he gave them a quick refresher course on the subject. ‘Yes, children, it’s strange to think that a god can die. I think so too, but it’s a religion, and you’ve got to have faith. Well, not really.’

Then he flipped on the light of reason again and explained that with the rise of tolerance, the first cracks began to appear in the Christian edifice, because the idea of a single Divine Truth was abandoned, making truth, at least in theory, a personal affair. And then from there it’s only one small step to the view that church and state should be separate and that the people should be sovereign in that state. The people make the laws, which the government then carries out, while the independent judiciary checks to make sure everything is running smoothly. The trias politica.

‘This, my friends, is the Grand Narrative of the Enlightenment in the West. The Islamic world, just to name an example, did not have such an Enlightenment. In practice, Church and State were separated only in Turkey, and even there with great difficulty, following Atatürk’s constitutional reform of 1924,’ – cheering

from a few Turkish boys – ‘which led to the banning of headscarves in government buildings and schools. Did you know that, girls?’ Two Turkish nuns laughed uneasily at the looks that were sent their way. ‘Most other Islamic countries’ – following the lead of his colleague Frank, Daan found a way of avoiding the word ‘backwards’, which was lying in wait on the tip of his tongue to hurt his listeners’ feelings – ‘have not yet managed to attain modernity. No, not even Morocco.’ Jeers from the Moroccan faction. A few of the Dutch students looked bored, at least that’s what it seemed like. But no, Thijs was raising his hand. Thijs called him by his first name. He came from a family of artists and was used to first-naming adults.

‘So, Daan, how come Morocco isn’t modern, like you said? Because it’s poor?’

‘Yes, prosperity and education and such are conditions for a modern society, yes.’

‘And why is Morocco so poor? Because of Islam?’ Tense silence. Running his fingers over three days worth of stubble, Daan took off his sunglasses and brushed back his thick dark brown hair, which stubbornly fell into two curtains over his ears. And then he was saved by the bell.

He sank down into his chair and looked right into Hajar’s eyes. Daan produced a snort of laughter which was accompanied by a shrug of the shoulders, raised eyebrows and pursed lips. What did he hope to convey with this body language? ‘Whew, that was a close one?’ Hajar did not react; she just glanced at him for an instant and then looked down at the notes she had taken. She closed her notebook and slipped it into her book bag. Next to her, Safinur was facing backwards, talking with the desk behind her.

In the meantime, six months had gone by, and Hajar was pedalling lustily but silently alongside Daan. The low-hanging sun pushed their hazy shadows ahead of them. Small, perfectly white clouds moved across the south-eastern sky above Dolinga Lane. At an intersection he pointed to two graceful loops which were

turned towards each other. Two people kissing, could she see that? After a long look she saw it, letting out a cry of delight. What was I going to do with that girl, thought Daan, but he was too taken with her to allow himself to answer such a question. During the first few months there had been contact between them, but what could come of it beyond a lingering look and a smile? Things were different with the Dutch girls. He regularly ran into them in the city, at the cafés or the dance clubs, and he had had his share of dalliances. Once a girl had even fallen in love with him, complete with fainting spells and everything – ‘They never faint for me,’ the somewhat older English teacher had said, to which the female vice principal bluntly retorted: ‘No, Herman, and they don’t fall in love with you either!’ – but *that* girl hadn’t decided to bike home with him on the spur of the moment (though in all fairness, she *had* collapsed next to him in the cafeteria line, whereupon the vice principal had said: ‘Irma Stam, if you don’t get up immediately, I’m going to throw a bucket of water on you!’), and Irma sprang to her feet, to Daan’s great surprise).

‘Well, uh, this is where I live,’ he said at the door of his box. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I just wanted to have a look inside.’

That was how it happened, esteemed members of the jury. Seventeen-year-old Hajar Nait Sibaha, a third-year honours student, bicycled home with me of her own volition, and upon being asked what she was doing, Ms Sibaha indicated that she, and I quote, ‘just wanted to have a look inside’ my flat. My flat, which was little more than a bed, although there was also a real bed, for sleeping in. When she discovered it, with me following behind her like a puppy dog, she oo-ed and ah-ed at my collection of teddy bears, picking up the big brown bear named Bob and cradling him in her arms. She asked me what his name was – ‘Bob,’ I said – but then she let Bob go because her arms wanted something else, and she hugged my neck and pulled me towards her, towards her full, curvaceous mouth, which opened slowly. And despite the awesome rapture of the moment, I saw a thin band of saliva trying to hold the two halves of her mouth together, but it snapped

and her lips touched mine as her eyes closed. I left mine open, at least at first. Did you want more details, esteemed members of the jury? Did you want to know how we undressed each other and how breathtakingly different it was from all the girls before her, not because her magnificent, tight body and unexpectedly heavy breasts were so impressive – though they were – but because she was Hajar and I had never had a Hajar before. She was a river that flowed towards love, past sex but including sex, though I didn't really understand that at the time. You will have gathered that Hajar was no beginner in that sweet game we were playing. I think you should take that into consideration, for although your existence may be shadowy, you certainly have enough power to pass judgement on me and Hajar. There had been a neighbourhood boy, last year, with whom she had...she didn't want to say much about it, she wanted to spare my feelings – what a sweetheart. It wasn't love, more like curiosity, and the boy had since moved away. And then there were Khalid's video tapes, which she had watched once in secret. She had been turned on by them, and sometimes she would even...well anyway. And then, members of the jury, she took the next condom out of the pack. No, condoms were one thing I've never lacked. And regret, you ask? Yes, that's true, my existence has been marked by a hopeless lack of regret. I couldn't tell you why that was, not even now.

I have to admit that I'd been fibbing to the person writing this report when I said that we had hardly had any contact with each other besides the occasional furtive glance. Hajar would often linger behind after class, and she would sometimes come by to chat during a free period. Oh yes, I made sure to leave the door open, except for the one time I closed it, and it was then that she suddenly kissed me on my cheek and said she was madly in love with me. And then I said I liked her an awful lot too and we repeated these words, or words like them, over and over. Rumours soon started flying. It doesn't take much at a school; people are always on the look-out for a scandal. And I have to be frank with you, esteemed member of the jury: I couldn't have cared less! I knew that there were certain limits, but those were not the limits of love, because love knew no limits.

They were the limits of a meddling morality which I despise. I say now. At the time I didn't think about it at all. I thought my life only consisted of endless space and movement in an everlasting today. Or something like that. And shame? I've never been ashamed of anything, except my parents. What was there to be ashamed of? Maybe it would help if I told you that sexual attention isn't always sexual harassment. Even if the person in question is a Moroccan girl. Even when she is seventeen (and her teacher thirty-two).

Yet Daan, with the dozing Hajar in his arms, still hoped they hadn't been spotted by his students; he didn't want any trouble. But trouble was already on the horizon: tomorrow he had a meeting with Pé Wessels, the principal. He had just wanted to chat, no big deal, it was just that he sometimes heard the strangest rumours. It was all nonsense of course, but a little tête-à-tête couldn't do any harm – right?

And then there was Khalid, that darling brother of hers.