

## Masterly, mysterious composition

# Hella Haasse

## Eye of the Key



**D**ESPITE HER ADVANCED YEARS, Hella S. Haasse always succeeds magnificently in penning novels that add something new and radical to her majestic oeuvre. Her latest novel has even been hailed by Dutch literary critics as one of the best she has ever written.

In *Sleuteloog*, Haasse returns to the Dutch East Indies, to her native soil and the place she considers the breeding ground of her imagination. This was also the setting for her debut novel from 1948, *Oeroeg*, which brought her overnight recognition as a Dutch writer. In *Oeroeg*, she describes the deterioration of a friendship between two boys, one Indonesian and the other from white Dutch parentage, just before and after the Second World War. A friendship from that time is also the central theme of *Sleuteloog*, but this time one between two girls and later young women: Herma Warner, from a white Dutch family, and Dee Meijers, from Indonesian-European origins.

In the opening sentences of the novel, a journalist asks Herma Warner for information on Dee Meijers. The journalist's request forces Herma to look over her shoulder. Back to Indonesia, and back in time. It soon becomes clear that Herma has developed a blind spot where many issues from the past are concerned. Was there actually any friendship between the two girls? What really happened? And what was the relationship between Dee and Taco Tadema, later Herma's husband, who also grew up in Batavia?

These are questions Herma has no adequate answer for. An ebony chest symbolises delving into the dim and distant past. It should contain notes and photographs of Dee and her husband, but the key is missing. This is a typical process in Haasse's work: little by little, Herma's past becomes clearer, without the mystery ever being entirely solved.

The masterly, mysterious composition of *Sleuteloog* does not, incidentally, prevent Haasse from taking a sharp view of Herma's guilt feelings, nor even from levelling heavy criticism at the European presence and disinterest in Indonesia. Herma Warner is all too aware of the fact that she was essentially a foreigner there. This theme, which has occupied Hella S. Haasse from the beginning of her writing career, has been reincarnated in *Sleuteloog* in a thrilling, socially involved and subtle manner.



photo Roy Tee

Hella S. Haasse (1918) made her debut in 1945, with a collection of poems, entitled *Stroomversnelling*. She made her name three years later with *Oeroeg*, which gained the status of a classic in the Netherlands. Her books have been greatly enjoyed by several generations. Haasse has received several prestigious literary awards.

*Sleuteloog* is a tale that has everything: drama, suspense, intrigue, infidelity, broken friendship and a whole lot of clashes between Indonesia and Holland, between swarthy and white, between second generation Dutch Indonesians and mixed families.

NRC HANDELSBLAD

*Sleuteloog* is a novel that approaches perfection: touching, gripping, biting, informative and thrilling. What more could a reader ask?

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### SELECTED TITLES IN TRANSLATION

*Les initiés* (De ingewijden). Arles: Actes Sud, 2003.  
*Un long week-end dans les Ardennes* (Fenrit). Arles, Actes Sud / Leméac, 2001. Also in Italian (Iperborea, in prep.)  
*Wald der Erwartung* (Het woud der verwachting). Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999. Also in English (Academy Chicago Publishers, 1997), in Portuguese (Lisboa: Teorema, in prep.) and in Spanish (Edhasa, 2001).

*La source cachée* (De verborgen bron). Arles: Actes Sud, 2000. Also in Italian (Iperborea, 1997) and in Russian (Mai, 1998).

*Les routes de l'imaginaire* (De wegen der verbeelding). Arles: Actes Sud, 1996. Also in German (Bertelsmann, 1999), in Italian (Iperborea, 2000).  
*Die Teebarone* (Heren van de thee). Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2001. Also in French (Éditions du Seuil, 1996), in Italian (Rizzoli, 1997), in Spanish (Ediciones Península, 1999) and in many other languages.

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An interview with Hella S. Haasse

## The limits of friendship and affection

by Anthony Mertens

*translated by Susan Ridder*

So as not to waste any time, Hella and I had agreed that we would discuss the manuscript on the train. Then I'd guide her across Paris, and we'd spend a few pleasant days in Grenoble. The train has left the station, and I take *Sleuteloog* (Eye of the Key) out of my bag. 'You don't have many notes,' she says, watching me rummage through the papers. 'Oh, but I do have plenty of questions.' We won't easily run out of things to say.

As I rifle through my suitcase, knowing that she will never ask me what I think of the novel, I mumble, 'Hella, I think it's beautiful and convincing.' She seems relieved, and settles into a more comfortable position. I don't understand this, such sensitivity in someone with such a large oeuvre to her name. 'Didn't I give it away too early?' 'No,' I say, 'It's complete.' *Sleuteloog* is a typical Haasse novel, dealing with a number of themes that recur in her other books. There is, for instance, the suitcase, case or file with documents, photographs, papers, objects, a family inheritance. In *Sleuteloog*, as in Hella's other novels – whether based on real stories or not – the archive plays an important role. Hella's novels are always about solving – partly solving usually – the secrets created during her characters' lives with the help of archives.

*Sleuteloog* also has the recurrent theme of friendship, a friendship which, however strong, slowly begins to crack, invisibly at first, but developing until breakdown is complete. The episodes about the friendship between Dee Mijers and Herma Warner, reminded me of *Oeroeg* ('Oeroeg was my friend.') and the friendship between Jason and mixed-race Tim Noonan in *Zwanen schieten* (Shooting Swans). This novel is also about racial, cultural and political differences, about making choices, and – a topic often subtly touched upon in her other novels – about the dividing line between the Islamic tradition (personified by the orchid grower Non) and the Judaeo-Christian. Reading between the lines one can sometimes hear the rumble of tectonic plates colliding.

*'When did you start this novel? When did the first idea, the first image, come to you?'*

After some consideration: 'I'm not sure. The idea has been with me for a long time. I've been thinking all my life about what I experienced as a child in the Dutch East Indies. Relatively late in life, in 1947, when the first police action started, I began to ask myself questions through a story about the imaginary relationship about a Dutch and an Indonesian child. The 1969 *Avenue*-commissioned trip with my husband Jan to Java and Bali made me realise that I needed to reconsider my opinion of the history of Indonesia

and the Dutch presence there. I wrote about this in *Krassen op een rots* (Scratches on a Rock), a title I derived from Willem Walraven.'

*'In Sleuteloog you did that again,' I suggest. 'You reconsidered your opinion of that country.'*

'Yes, I have the feeling that I crossed a boundary with this novel, and rid myself of delusions. I discarded the illusion that I was ever really at home in the Dutch East Indies, and the illusion that it was the way it had been presented to me personally. I've stopped imagining things. For a long time I considered myself more vulnerable than I really am.'

*'You don't see yourself as the 'girl from the Dutch East Indies' any more?'*

'I no longer need to convince myself that I'm indeed Indonesian in some way,' says Hella. 'I believe that the seed for this novel was sown in the seventies and eighties, when the literature of the Dutch East Indies began to emerge in our country. Through the many discussions that were held at the time, I became aware of the complex relationships between those many types of 'Indonesian' Dutchmen. On the one side, there were those of mixed blood in multiple combinations. Next there were the 'white' Dutchmen who were born and raised in the East Indies, and then there were those Dutchmen who went to the colony at a later age who lived and worked there for a long time and were therefore no longer 'really' Dutch. This was no problem at all during my childhood, to me the multicultural atmosphere of the large Indonesian town was completely natural, of no concern whatsoever. I lived in Batavia, Surabaya, Bandung and Buitenzorg almost without a break from 1918 to 1938. There you constantly encountered people of different races, people with different customs and traditions, like the Javanese, Indonesians from other parts of the archipelago who, in turn, differed from each other in social or intellectual status. Then there were the Chinese and 'Eastern foreigners,' such as Arabs and Japanese. Both white Dutchmen and those of mixed race were regarded as European. Officially, there was no difference, and even in practice upper-class Indo-Europeans weren't discriminated against. The so-called 'little Indos', however, had a lifestyle often closer to the native one than to the European – read the stories of Tjalie Robinson or Victor Ido's novel *De paupers* (The Paupers).

These little Indos were, in reality, discriminated against by Indo-Europeans who were higher up the social ladder. You could compare this to the way the upper-class in the Netherlands used to treat the working class. As you know, I had a very sheltered upbringing; during my childhood I didn't consider the differences between classes and communities important. I thought it completely normal that many of my parents' acquaintances and fellow students were "Indonesian". You knew each other because you were raised the same way and attended the same schools.'

*'How is this consistent with remarks you made in Zelfportret als legkaart (Self-portrait as Jigsaw), in which you say that you didn't live the Indonesian way at home, and that your parents didn't want you and your brother to go 'native'?'*

'Anyone who spent the twenties and thirties in the former Dutch East Indies knows that the "Indonesian lifestyle" – based on customs and attitudes of nineteenth-century colonial life – had already gone out of fashion. It certainly wasn't for people who didn't belong to a sprawling, often mixed, family that had lived in the East Indies for generations. There was a rapid process of modernisation on all fronts. My parents came to the East Indies in 1911 and 1914 respectively and lived and worked there until 1945, surviving the Japanese occupation. They really loved the East Indies, but they had no family ties there, no background. They lived according to the European tradition which had moulded them, and took for granted that they would spend their old age in Europe.

Without family roots, our family couldn't live the 'traditional Indonesian way of life', but we did live the Indonesian way in the sense of living as part of the changing, modernising 1920s' Dutch East Indian society. Actually, I feel very sorry for my parents, who saw their lives brutally interrupted by the Japanese occupation.'

*'What did "going native" mean in your case ?'*

"Going native" is the negative, as it were, the reverse of what many Eurasians consciously strove for. White Dutchmen could become part of an Indonesian family through marriage. Children from a mixed marriage would, of course, have roots in the East Indies. Because of their own background, however, my parents always thought of us as having a future in the Netherlands, while my brother and I, 'formed' by our childhood in the East Indies, would have preferred to continue living there, with all the consequences such a choice might have entailed.'

I tell her that her description of the friendship between Herma Warner and Dee Mijers reminded me constantly of *Oeroeg*, her debut. As in *Sleuteloog*, its protagonist attempts to explain his relationship with his childhood friend. In both cases it is important that the bosom friends are from different backgrounds. *Oeroeg*'s friend, the 'I' of the novella, and Herma Warner both have Dutch parents. *Oeroeg*, on the other hand, is a native, and Dee is of 'mixed blood'. That influences their friendships.

*'Did you, half a century later, intend to avenge the critics who reproached you for the narrator in Oeroeg using colonial stereotypes, saying that you, as a writer, hardly knew what was going on among the native population, and therefore weren't entitled to speak?'*

Hella isn't interested in revenge. She remembers that in *Oeroeg* she used the qualification 'Indonesian' several times in the context of pre-war society, and that in *Zelfportret als legkaart* she made some remarks about her parents' attitude towards 'the

Indonesian way of life' and 'going native' which caused quite a few critical reactions and misunderstandings.

'Over time I've come to realise how loaded and influential the interpretation of these terms was. In *Sleuteloog* I've tried to paint the various types of colonial Indonesian through people I knew, whom I grew up with, whom I belong to.'

*'So you recognise yourself in Herma Warner? As a young girl, Herma couldn't imagine Dee seeing her as a 'totok.' After all, they were both Indonesian, born and bred in the same country. In that sense, Herma was just like the narrator in Oeroeg – innocent during childhood.'*

'Yes, that's right.'

*'In Sleuteloog a woman in her late seventies looks back with the knowledge she now has – for example – of what the Dutch did there over the centuries. Is it possible to correct the distortion which the memory has inevitably caused, to bridge the gap between the Herma making her notes in the nineties and the Herma who, as a child, was unaware of all the differences between the different communities, but who absorbed, and perhaps internalised, the cultural differences?'*

'That's exactly what I wanted to look at in this novel – how far do mutual understanding and empathy go? Where are the limits of friendship and affection? If there is common ground, a form of mutuality under or above or beyond all that is logical and defined, where do you look for it? In which unexplored areas of personal contact. It's only now that I've lived an entire life that I dare look at things that I always took for granted and never saw as a problem.'

*'The novel shows a bond between Dee and Herma, a bond which they maintained despite the enormous gulf that developed over a lifetime. Could one say that Dee and Herma use camouflage to deal with their fundamental insecurity? Dee a political disguise, and Herma her imagination?'*

'They have different temperaments, of course, and different backgrounds – they come from different Dutch East Indian communities. With hindsight, however, this was more important than Herma could have suspected. Dee chose to fight society's inequality. She was also much more sensual than Herma, and perhaps Herma admired and envied her, because it was easier for Dee to express this. What I wanted to explore was the climate they both grew up in, and the basis it offered for the further development of their lives.'

*'At the beginning of the novel, after Herma Warner receives a letter from journalist Moorland with a request for information about Dee Mijers, Herma wonders whether refreshing her memory will be of any use, because the fixed perception of colonial history cannot be changed. Which fixed perception is she talking about, and why can't it be changed?'*

Hella dismisses this with a wave. ‘Anthony,’ she says, ‘You know very well that nothing good could be said about our colonial history during the sixties, or about our presence in Indonesia. We were exploiters, we sucked the country dry. The army committed crimes against humanity. There is no denying that mistakes were made and that there were excesses in dealing with the local population, and it’s very good that the ‘tempo dulu’ (literally: ‘the old rhythm’, meaning ‘the relaxed colonial life’) image relished in some circles here has been adjusted. But to Herma, this didn’t do justice to the complexity of the world she grew up in, or to the positive experiences she had there. That to the Dutch the Dutch East Indies were no more than a conquered land, doesn’t do justice to people like Laurens Reael, the third governor-general in VOC times whose life Herma’s husband, Taco Tadema, researched.’

*‘Batavia was a melting pot. The novel pays quite a lot of attention to all the different delineations, the different native communities, the different groups of Chinese, totoks, whites. To me this book is also about discrimination, a concept which we, children of the Enlightenment, only know in the pejorative sense. Yet all those subtle codes were hallmarks of one’s identity, you knew to whom you belonged. Only when discrimination is practised with force do things appear to go wrong. This happens not only in Herma’s relationship with Dee, who increasingly identifies with oppressed groups, but also in her relationship with Non, Dee’s aunt with whom Herma shares a love of orchids, and with whom Herma empathises because of her mystical experiences. At the end of the novel, when Non, after her trip to Mecca, has become a Muslim, Herma describes her really viciously. She doesn’t like Non’s demonstrative piety. What surprised me is that Herma shows her worst side when she reports Dee to the authorities. Her betrayal is the end of the friendship. Why does Herma turn against Dee?’*

‘I’m surprised, Anthony, that you call Herma’s reaction vicious. It’s true that Herma feels instinctively awkward about strong, uncontrolled expressions of emotions and has no affinity with religious passion of any kind, but she would never show Dee her dislike, because she loves and respects Non. Herma’s ‘betrayal’ of Dee is, of course, a different matter. It’s based on mistrust – Non’s disappearance, death. It also has to do with sexual jealousy and with being hurt, emotions which developed later in life due to the supposed relationship between Dee and Taco. Herma’s turning against Non and Dee, as you call it, can also be seen as a reaction to their excluding her. That, at least, is how she experiences Non’s conversion to Islam and Dee’s secret affair with Taco.’

*‘I find it remarkable that you name sexual jealousy as a motif, because she doesn’t seem to notice Taco Tadema’s sensual side during her relationship with him. Initially, she can’t imagine that he has his own fantasies. Their relationship seems to be based first of all on spiritual affinity.’*

‘You need to be aware of the atmosphere young people lived in, and the norms and values of the time. Don’t forget social control either – people were aware of their own and others’ sensuality, but there was no chance of expressing or experimenting with it.

To be honest, however, you accepted that larger freedoms in this respect had to wait till later.

I did indicate that Herma and Taco experienced the beginning of such freedom in the summer of 1939, when Herma came to the Netherlands after her final exams.

As a result of the separation during the five war years, and particularly due to the aftermath of Taco's experiences in Burma, something in their relationship that might otherwise have developed, was destroyed. Their marriage is based on loyalty, affection and spiritual affinity. From the suppressed relationship between Taco and Dee, whatever it's nature, and from Herma's reaction when she discovers it, it is clear that both Taco and Herma were frustrated by what was lost, the 'spark' that again has everything to do with their childhood in the tropics and the circumstances of the former Dutch East Indies. This also explains why Dee was attractive to Taco.'

*'Taco studies Reael, the third governor-general of the East Indies in 1616, a humane man who had an eye for the injustices the Dutch perpetrated and for the character of the indigenous population. Herma and Taco think it in their interest that this person, who was friends with Hooft and Barlaeus, becomes better known. If Reael, who was inspired by humanism, had been the example for Dutch policies in the East Indies, our colonisation could have been beneficial. Do you share Taco and Herma's opinion?'*

Hella laughs out loud. 'That's a rhetorical question, Anthony, so you answer that one. Yes, of course, although I doubt whether that influence would have lasted through the centuries. Anyway, initially it was only about ethics in trade relations, not about colonisation.'

*'I was constantly under the impression that Herma led a lonely life, longing for love and friendship but not really capable of it because she was incapable of recognising her own motives. It is as if from a very early age she wanted to find a heile Welt, harmony, pure relationships, unspoilt by anything human, yet at the same time all too human. At a later age, Herma is forced to recognise not only other people's objectionable habits, but her own too. How do you see this?'*

'I think that the quest for self-knowledge is a necessary aspect of adulthood. It takes courage, but Herma is not afraid.'

**Sample translation from**

*Eye of the Key* by Hella Haasse  
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**Translated by Susan Ridder**

(pages 80 – 99)

Mrs. Myers sits at the tea table on the inside veranda. Outside, the monsoon rain lashes the back yard, water from the roof splashing down into the over-full masonry gutter lining the house, creating a cloud of fine spray that is blown inside by the draught. Dee and I, leaning back breathless into our rattan chairs, love this after a day of oppressive heat. Mrs. Myers, too, has finally put away her fan. She looks at the wet patches on the marble tiles of the back veranda and shakes her head.

‘Adé, sit properly,’ she says suddenly. ‘That isn’t lady-like.’

Dee sinks even deeper into her chair, draws her dress up to her groin, kicks off her shoes (at my home, we are allowed to walk barefoot, but not at Mrs. Myers’) and waves her legs in the air.

‘I’m a dancer, like my Ma, Nadia! Yes, Nadia, Nadia! Why can’t I be told?’

Surprised, I start up, wanting to warn, but it is too late. There is no response. Mrs. Myers just shuffles the things around on the tea tray. It’s the only time I’ve ever seen her not in control of the situation. Of course, she’s able to guess who is responsible for breaking the taboo kept so strictly for so many years. But she also knows, how indirect Non is, and that she wouldn’t have given more than a few facts, no more than half-truths, and those under protest. No doubt she sees it as pressure from her daughter to end the unnatural secrecy. I suddenly

realise that she is not angry but disconcerted, ashamed for being wrong to let things slide for so long. Now, she is unable to find the right tone, the right words.

The thunder and lightning that preceded the downpour aren't over yet. There is more lightning, thunder rumbles nearby.

Mrs. Myers' voice is higher than usual, trembling when she launches incoherently into a series of statements to the effect that 'that Polish woman' without future (she has no talent) was out to snare Louis from the start. She got pregnant on purpose. 'He had no alternative, being a gentleman.'

In the same breath, she claims that Nadia's immorality was clear for all to see, because while her baby was still in the cradle, she allowed herself to be seduced by another travelling artist, a stand-up comedian who had long been regarded an undesirable in the Dutch East Indies because of his political views. She left with him, Mrs. Myers doesn't want to know where for. She does know, however, how difficult it was for Louis to arrange the divorce.

Dee has sprung up and is running out of the house through the front veranda. I hesitate, but when I see her cross the lawn in front of the house towards the street in the pouring rain, I run after her. She refuses to come back with me, splashes barefoot through the puddles.

Eventually, I fetch my bike, which Mrs. Myers' *kebon* parked as always on the veranda of the outbuilding. Dee is almost at the end of the lane when I brake beside her. She slips onto my rear carrier without a word.

I make for home, pedalling against gusts of rain that come at us from all sides, afraid that the lightning will strike one of the tall trees along the deserted road (the thunder and lightning do not let up for a moment). By the time we arrive, we haven't a shred of dry clothing on us and rain drips from our hair. Dee's wet hands feel ice-cold on my shoulders.

We find my mother in the drawing room editing a project she loves, *The East Indian Women's Yearbook*. Not yet dressed after her bath, she's in her housecoat, a towel wrapped turban-like around her head. The venetian blinds are closed against the thunderstorm, the light is on and the aroma of soil and dripping

leaves wafts through the open doors that lead to our small garden. She is in the process of inserting two quarto sheets interleaved with carbon paper into my father's typewriter. Shaking her head absentmindedly, she says, 'There you are, you're soaked wet! Have a wash and put on something clean. Dee, take one of Herma's dresses.'

Umar has a cloth out to mop up the trail of water we leave behind, while Idah has put some dry clothes in the bathroom. It is she who tells us off for our ride through the bad weather.

'Aduh, you're letting the babu bully you!' says Dee. They're the first words she speaks since we left Mrs. Myers' house. Then she bursts into tears. Terrible to behold, with her screaming and nearly choking on her tears. My mother rushes to her, takes her to the guest room, and stays talking with her there for a long time.

Later, I was told what happened, though not by Dee. I didn't ask, because Dee didn't talk about it. Her silence told me that 'Nadia' had changed from an interesting secret into a painful riddle.

My mother admitted she'd met Nadia Wychinska only a few times, and had hardly spoken to her, because they couldn't understand each other's French. The artist had been very free in her manners, and unembarrassedly open. She was fairly critical of Dutch East Indian bourgeois attitudes and narrow-mindedness, and was deeply disappointed in Louis, who had promised her a life of adventure and tropical wealth. She said it was impossible to live under the same roof with Mrs. Myers and Non. And Louis, he loved going out and didn't want to stay at home with a pregnant wife, who refused to appear in public until she could dress fashionably again. She suffered a lot from the heat and was bored to death.

What my mother didn't want to say, but thought that Dee would feel instinctively, was that Nadia was shocked when she discovered that Louis, although wealthy, nevertheless seemed to be regarded as a second-class citizen.

When she saw his sister, she was horrified – she didn't want her child to be half-caste!

How silly, thought my mother, marrying someone overnight whose country and background you do not know. Very unfair to Louis. Poor Dee.

But Dee saw it differently. Nadia became her heroine, her example, a courageous woman who recognised the faults in colonial society in time, and chose freedom.

Non has finally given in to my pleas to take me downtown to Muntingh House. So after lunch, while Mrs. Myers is resting – because she is not to know – we take a *deleman* to Kali Besar West, an area full of offices, eateries and *tokos*, which I only know from nightly outings with my parents when the streets, now quiet during the hottest part of the day, are crowded and filled with coloured lights, Chinese advertisements and the smell of cooking. Through a small archway in an otherwise blind wall we enter a bare, narrow, sun-drenched front yard. The house is squashed between two office buildings. It's considered uninhabitable, a ruin. From remarks made by Mrs. Myers, Louis and Non, I understand it is still owned by the family, and that the government is willing to buy it 'for next to nothing' (as Louis says disparagingly) to restore it and show it off as a historic monument, the counterpart of the famous Reynier de Klerk House. There is little to see from the outside – a square façade, a lean-to, no front veranda but tall, narrow windows hidden behind shutters. The outside wall, unplastered since time immemorial, is covered in patches of damp. Only the front door has some ornamentation, a stone frame with carved swirls and rosettes at the base on either side of the doorstep.

The guard appears from under the lean-to, the only spot with shade. He has received Non's message and is ready to unlock the padlocks on the antique iron bolts. It is clear he doesn't want to go inside, so Non indicates that we do not need a guide. Nobody has lived here since the beginning of the nineteenth century.

A little light seeps in through cracks in the closed shutters, allowing me – now that my eyes are used to the dark – to distinguish traces of red paint and gilt on the wooden doors and window frames. There are holes in the tiled floor, and a musty smell of wood rot and decay permeates the place. The walls, which haven't been white for a long time, are streaked with dirt from rainwater that has leaked through the broken roof. The showpiece is the staircase with its carved banisters. Once upon a time, says Non, it led to a first-floor room for parties and receptions, but the entire upper floor collapsed years ago. The rooms at the rear of the house are also inaccessible, because of the beams and planks dangling from the ceilings. Through the half-open door to those rooms, however, I can see part of the skirting of Delft Blue tiles. At home we have one of those tiles in a frame on the wall, a souvenir from my father's city of birth.

It all makes me think of life in the past, of life between those almost windowless walls in the sticky heat and fumes of the Kali Besar. I imagine Muntingh House – that I know from an eighteenth-century drawing – peopled by characters like the ones drawn by the artist walking under palm trees along the river banks. Ladies and gentlemen in western clothes, accompanied by servants with *pajongs*. Now I realise that all that pomp was only for the outside world, for church visits and leisurely walks. The same is true for the house, there is no adornment other than at the front of the house, where guests are received. I feel strange, as if I'm about to be sucked into the daily reality of another time – the buzz and bustle of small, cramped rooms where women dressed in their home attire of batik wrap-around skirts and long shirts (and usually squatting on cushions or mats), fan themselves or are fanned, chat, make decorations or do needlework, where children are bathed or rocked, the sick are nursed and sweets are passed round, while the bamboo-grilled windows let in the sounds and smells of the tropical day, the city life that passes by the inhabitants of Muntingh House. I neither hear nor see a thing, yet there is something there, the echo of decades of unchanging life in the *salet*, whether that of the Chinese major's daughter, the beautiful black woman, or any of the others who once lived there as Lady

Muntingh. There is no draught, yet something strange is blown at me from those dark rooms. I grow dizzy.

‘Come, Tut,’ says Non behind me. She carefully opens a creaking door.

Suddenly, we are back in the bright sunlight. In the courtyard where we stand, she points out some outbuildings on the other side. There were stables there once, and rooms for the tens of male and female slaves.

She throws me a sideways glance that confuses me. Was I wrong to have pestered her about seeing the house, that has fascinated me ever since she told me about the Muntingh’s past? Suddenly she seems different, more self-confident, distant. Imposing her will as never before, she guides me through her ancestors’ home. I go where she goes, stop where she stops. Not allowing me to touch anything myself, she takes my hand and guides my finger tips across the woodwork of door panels and ornaments on the balustrade of the half-open courtyard veranda. It is as if I’m blind and she wants me to memorise the patterns of the flowers, leaves, garlands and the shapes of the ornamental vases and twisted balustrade.

Suddenly she says, ‘Enough – yes?’

We leave Muntingh House, climb into the *deleman* and ride to Pasar Baru, where Dee is waiting for us to have ice cream together.

Dee was unimpressed by my account of the salon and the women who lived there. A murder may have been committed there, it may have been haunted, some wife or daughter probably had a secret love affair with some stranger! My essay about my first and last visit to the house, illustrated with drawings of ornamental vases and carved flower motifs (the ornaments appeared to have been engraved on my memory), prompted Dee to say, ‘Well done, you always write well.’ but in the same breath, she also called it ‘boring’. If she were to write an essay – but she insisted she couldn’t – she would have chosen a very different subject from the past. She left me guessing for a long time. ‘I won’t tell you, she said, ‘You won’t like it!’ But eventually she did tell me. It was during the afternoon siesta, as we

sat side by side on my bed doing homework, our backs against the wall, the *goeling* under our knees.

She told me that ever since our annual compulsory school excursion to the sights of Old Batavia, she'd been thinking of Pieter Erberveld, who had plotted against the Company, been executed on 14 April 1722, and whose white-plastered, impaled head could still be seen on a piece of wall on Jacatra Road. Standing in a semi-circle facing the memorial, an upright gravestone, we were told the story of his horrific torture. One of us had to read out the inscription: 'In repugnant memory of the punished traitor Pieter Erberveld, no-one may build, hammer, lay bricks or plant here, now, or at any time.'

Dee suggested that Pieter Erberveld must have known the Muntinghs of his time, may even have tried to win one of them round for that conspiracy of his to kill the Europeans.

'What about Erberveld himself?' I asked.

'He was an *Indo*, wasn't he?' said Dee. 'And those Muntinghs weren't white either anymore.'

I wasn't as surprised by her offhand use of the loaded word *Indo*, as I was how the casualty she approved of Erberveld's plan to convince the city government to appoint a Javanese as head of the native population. The area would have been governed by people who belonged there, she said, instead of by VOC *totoks* only interested in merchandise, money and power. They, after all, regarded all non-Dutch, all non-whites, as inferior. Pieter Erberveld had been allowed no opportunities, he had been reminded every day that he was of mixed blood. She could understand him.

She sounded as if she were trying to provoke me, as if we had been arguing. I asked her whether she thought of herself as an *Indo*.

'Grandpa Myers had a Javanese grandmother, and my grandmother's family has all colours – white, brown, yellow and black. Look at Non! She thinks she's dark because she's a descendant of the beautiful black woman. Her skin was like ebony.'

‘But you have French and Polish blood, don’t you? As European as can be.’  
Dee lashed out – ‘Okay, but I’m still not a *totok*!’  
‘Nor me,’ I said with conviction.

In 1936 Dee failed her third year at school. She didn’t want to resit the whole year, she wanted to leave the gymnasium and go to the three-year *hbs* or girls to take school-leaving certificate at the end of the following year. Mrs. Myers, my parents and I all tried to dissuade her, but she insisted she was sick and tired of Greek. And no matter what, she had no intention of going to university anyway. For the first time ever, I heard her scoff at our school, describing it as an ‘elite’ institution for breeding *totok* intellectuals for executive jobs in the Dutch East Indies. After all, she said, most students who went to the University of Leyden (by preference), wanted to return to the land of their childhood. And they always got precedence, both in the government and in business.

It was then we must have begun to grow apart. The senior years at the gymnasium were hard work for me – I wasn’t slow, but I wasn’t brilliant either. Dee, however, went through a period of obsessive interest in her looks and going out. I noticed she was changing, and we saw less and less of each other.

Mrs. Myers allowed her to go to parties at school and at houses (no Saturday went by without some birthday party), but unlike many other girls from the three-year school, Dee wasn’t allowed to go dancing with Batavian bachelors in Hotel des Indes or the Yacht Club at the seaside. Like my parents, Mrs. Myers was immovable on this. Dee and I, though, considered ourselves too old for parties at the school gym or on the back veranda of some classmate’s house. In our evening dresses, and being half a head taller than most boys – who looked childish even in suits and ties – we already looked like women. I only went to these parties, with their unvarying programmes of party games like ‘hunt the slipper,’ ‘sur qui’, charades, and dancing to gramophone music, out of solidarity – the candles in the lanterns were never extinguished later than midnight.

Dee told me in the strictest of confidence that she regularly broke her grandmother's rules and, instead of going to a home party, went to some famous dance venue or other with a few other popular girls and their – always older – partners. She borrowed lipstick and sophisticated dresses (black, bare-back!) and, if it got late, which it usually did, she stayed overnight as well.

I was worried she would find me too childish, but her bout of frivolity ended as abruptly as it started. From what little she told me, I gathered she had soon had enough of the more or less compulsory 'touring' at the end of the evening – couples in taxis going for a drive down Priok Road or through the dark outskirts behind Manggarai and, as if it were a natural continuation of the entertainment, the escorts fondling the girls. Dee was offended by the lack of respect, the men counting on making love, behaving as though there were some unspoken agreement. Most of all, however, she felt humiliated by the presence of the native driver, who would stare straight, immobile, but whose contempt hung heavy in the air. Since she wasn't a *totok*, he judged her by the white man's behaviour, and saw a whore. Never before had she been so painfully aware of being an *Indo*. Her manner when she told me all this made me realise something critical had changed in our relationship. She was defensive, as if I was attacking her, reproaching her. In the period that followed, she seemed unusually withdrawn, but I thought I knew the reason when she passed her examinations with flying colours.

One day when visiting her, I find her poring over books and magazines. She wants to learn Malay, not the language of the *pasar*, which we all speak well, but High Malay, the kind used in offices and in native newspapers. She also practises shorthand and typing. Useful for people like her to get jobs, she sneers in a tone I've never heard her use before.

Mrs. Myers is very disappointed in her granddaughter who, by making such a choice – she says in my presence – 'will slide down the social ladder'.

‘Grandmamma, there’s a depression on,’ Dee tries unconvincingly, ‘I’ll get work in an office. Half-castes make the best secretaries, don’t they?’

She sticks up her thumb. *‘Djempol!’*

Both the word and the gesture are inadmissible in that house. I see Mrs. Myers take a deep breath and turn away to stare silently out the window, to where the purple bougainvillea are in abundant flower.

I knew Sulawati Saleh from outdoor games at school. A girl from the parallel class who wanted to be called Sula, she was a very good *kastie* player, running fast and hitting the ball like no other. She was considered an exception even among the already emancipated native girls at our school. Even those who wore western clothes and had no pigtails were traditionally subdued and modest, almost shy. But Sula never lowered her eyes – she spoke her mind without fear and, at the school club’s debate nights she always attended, the sharpness of her argument and her tenacity set her apart.

It was some time after Dee had left school before I discovered she was friends with Sula. She said she had kept it from me because, she said, Sula didn’t like me. Today I understand that circumstances at the time dictated her feelings, but at the time I couldn’t understand her hostility. Nor could I understand why she had been so secretive about a friendship which, as far as I could see, posed no threat to the family-like bond between us.

Yet again I miss Dee at the Tjikini swimming pool. We used to go there every day at half past twelve, when she was still at school – after classes and before lunch. Since she’s started the course in administration, however, I see her less and less among our regular crowd of boys and girls who meet for a relaxed programme of splashing, diving, floating and chatting at the poolside.

It’s nearly half past two. The afternoon siesta has already quietened the lanes of the Menteng and Tanah Abang quarters when I park my bike behind Mrs. Myers’ house and walk down the side veranda to Dee’s room. I find her sitting on

the tiled floor in her petticoat, folding sheets of paper which she slips into greyish envelopes with what looks like loose numbers of a magazine.

My arrival clearly takes her by surprise, for she starts, as if caught red-handed. When I ask what she's doing, she quickly brushes aside the printed material spread out across the floor. I pick up one of the leaflets which, judging from the picture on the cover, looks like promotional material for medicinal calcium tablets and Purol cream. The text inside is in Malay, which I can't read very well, although I'm able to recognise a few words.

'What are you doing? What's this for?' I ask again.

She snatches the leaflet from my hands and stuffs it all into a cupboard, which she locks.

'I'm helping Sula, it's for her study club,' she says at last.

Everyone knows that after her exams, Sula wants to study at the Batavian School of Law. This is regarded at school as yet another sign of her independence from her community. I respect her courage because I know from conversations with other, less confident, less determined native girls that studying at university is considered an irreparable break with tradition, mainly because of where it can lead. Sula's parents, however, who come from the matriarchal tradition of the Padang Uplands of Sumatra, support her. So she's apparently already a member of some club for first-year students?! Dee says Sula can't prepare the packages for the post at home, and Mrs. Myers is not to know. I persist in my questioning, unused to Dee keeping secrets from me.

Is it for some sideline of Sula's, for pocket money? Advertisements for Irmischer, Batavia's large chemist, feature the same picture of the finger-wagging man in a white coat recommending products for tooth and skin care to their mixture of European and native customers. I can imagine that Sula wouldn't want people to know, because in her milieu it might be regarded as shameful, harmful to her parents' status. I offer to help.

Dee rejects my proposal, though, and the manner in which she does so encourages me to try again to bridge the strange gulf between Sula and me. I

want to be her friend too, just like Dee. Are all the members of Sula's student club natives? They probably regard me a real *Belanda totok*. Dee, who knows me, can surely tell them they're wrong?

A flood of words bursts from Dee that hurt me deeply because, to my mind, they have nothing to do with me. She wonders what I, Herma, really know about those people. After all, I deal only with servants, who allow themselves to be pushed around, or with the Javanese regents' daughters at school, who live in an elitist world of their own. I have never talked to people like Sula's friends, I have no idea what goes on inside their heads, about what they think of me and all other *Belandas*, and about stupid *Indos* who act as if they were *Belandas*. Do I ever think what it is like for native intellectuals always treated as children? Can I imagine what it means to belong to a people 'of a lesser kind' in your own country? Oh, I'm very nice about Sula and other Javanese and Ambonese students at school, but don't I look down on them?

'She can feel it, you know!' Dee is vehement.

I can't find the words to convince her the opposite is true.

Outside, the wind picks up. The sun shines through the leaves of the trees beside the house, casting a moving pattern of light and shade on the veranda's tiled floor.