

Rendering the invisible visible

Marie Kessels

Rough



MARIE KESSELS WRITES novels set inside the often fickle minds of her protagonists who are willing to go to any length to defend their autonomy. The subject of this new novel is blindness. Gemma, the protagonist, is injured in a traffic accident which leaves her sight permanently damaged. 'It happened so fast that I can hardly remember it. A terrible moment before the blow, then the ear-splitting sound as of an

explosion, a noise in which my pain (which must have been there) was lost.'

The novel's short, poignant chapters describe how Gemma tries to rebuild her life. Now excluded from the world in which she is visible to others, she sets out to map it on nocturnal walks through the neighbourhood during which she registers every tile and drainpipe she passes. She thus discovers a new city, a 'new nocturnal universe'. But she doesn't only use her sense of touch, she also asks others to read to her and she learns Braille, using her new skills to read *Blindness* by Jose Saramago, *The Light that Failed* by Rudyard Kipling and *Touching the Rock* by John Hull. The old blues singer, Blind Willie McTell, also fascinates her.

Kessels has always been a sensitive and sensual author and, in this novel, she immerses the reader in the effect of invisibility – the smell of rain in the air, or how the sounds of a busy city can evoke a panorama. The tone of the novel is, however, never melancholy or plaintive, rather it is lighthearted with determination fairly jumping off its pages. As always with Kessels, the story is not in the plot but in the imaginative details and original ideas – now formulated by Gemma. *Ruw* (Rough) does what literature should: render the invisible visible.

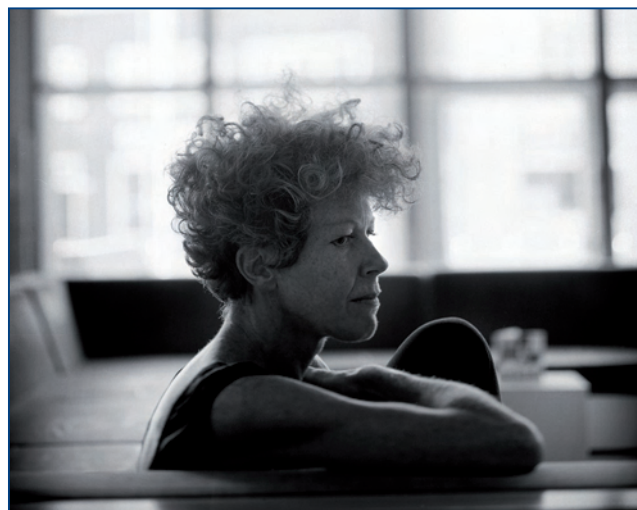


photo Tessa Posthuma de Boer

Boa, the 1991 debut novel of Marie Kessels (b. 1954), is about a young woman who locks herself into her own house for one summer. Kessels followed this with *Een sierlijke duik* ('A Graceful Dive', 1993). Her third novel, *De god met gouden ballen* ('The God with Golden Balls', 1995) was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize and was reprinted several times. Her three most recent books are not novels, but meditations on love, the mind, the body, eroticism and art. She won the Multatuli Prize for her 1998 book *Ongemakkelijke portretten* ('Uneasy Portraits'). *Het nietigste* ('The Most Insignificant'), a collection of short, skilful contemplations and reflections, was published in 2002 and *Niet vervloekt* ('Not Cursed') appeared in 2005. *Ruw* ('Rough') is her fourth novel and has been brilliantly received by the press.

Ruw is more than a novel evoking what it is like to become blind. In some senses, it is also a plea for better reading, slower reading and for the pleasure this provides. *HET PAROOL*

Kessels manages to maintain a wonderful balance between being a victim and being determined, between being hopeless and being optimistic, and between being resigned and being assertive. *NRC HANDELSBLAD*

This novel's victory is the alienation which *Ruw* imposes on the reader. Do we ever look properly, considering that Gemma shows us that you can experience so much more using smell, taste, hearing and touch? (...) This novel is a gem.

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RIGHTS

De Bezige Bij
Van Miereveldstraat 1
NL – 1071 DW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 305 98 10
FAX: +31 20 305 98 24
E-MAIL: info@debezigebij.nl
WEBSITE: www.debezigebij.nl



Foundation for the
Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Singel 464
NL – 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL.: +31 20 620 62 61
FAX: +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL: office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE: www.nlpvf.nl

Sample Translation

Rough

(RuW)

by Marie Kessels

(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2009)

Translated by Laura Watkinson

pages 7–17

How are we going to cope?

To smell the rain coming! The smell comes before it, foreshadowing that familiar rain smell that hangs like a haze above the ground. Not just the grass and the trees and the bushes, but the roads, the pavements and the bricks of the houses smell so potent tonight, like the stones of an old castle.

The west wind brings the smell of burning with it too; there's a fire somewhere, maybe twenty kilometres away. The enchantment of so many scents is strong; they intoxicate me and I forget to focus on memorising my route. I'm all over the place! The majestic force of the wind pulverises every other sensory perception and confuses my sense of direction so much that only moving very quickly could give me any sense of unity and continuity.

But moving quickly requires a calm fearlessness, which is hard to achieve when you're bumping into everything and the leaves on overhanging branches whip against your face until you feel as though you're in a state of delirium.

On easier routes than this one down Annastraat, like the walk along the Grote Vaart, I can still allow myself the idle enjoyment of the wind and all kinds of different smells.

My first account of an expedition through the city at night, my first, jolting and jerking sentences in Braille, corrected three times, with the friction of pressing the Braille stylus into the paper leaving swollen bumps on my fingers. Now I can finally read back over what I've written. I make another version in pencil, more fleeting than letters in sand; afterwards I find nothing there except the pricks in the paper to indicate where the lines begin. Don, our professor, found the Braille letters on the internet and I copied them out again and again, using a safety pin to create symbols that were at all kinds of angles and only just about recognisable, until the parcel arrived with the writing materials and the white stick.

My friends have been kind enough right from the beginning not to rush to my assistance; I've given them their orders and rationed the help, even though I'm not always consistent. Sometimes I phone Don in a panic about some trivial thing or other, but as soon as he picks up the phone I regret my impulse. Usually it's enough just to picture the figures of my friends in my mind, each of them wrapped in an aura of light.

Don, with his angular face and his dry skin, which rustles in the cold.

Ernst, spongy of body, introverted of character.

Ingeborg, the enthusiastic one, with her common sense.

They're putting a brave face on it too.

At night I dream of Braille, reading it and writing it, and in the morning I wake up with my fingertips glowing and tapping. Instead of Braille, Cyrillic letters sometimes put in an appearance, in a Russian newspaper that I'm studying eagerly, together with my mother, with Mother of all people, eighteen months after her ashes were scattered. She's suddenly driving a car too, she waves at us, she's scared of nothing. Strangely, when she calls out to me, she says not 'Gemma', but 'Clemens': the name for her second child born alive if it had been a boy. A little later, she transforms into a voluptuous, blind pin-up and the whole world around her turns into an endless succession of showrooms and department stores with brightly lit display windows, leaving me baffled as I wake up.

But last night I had a genuine blind dream, in which Ernst's badly shaven chin rasped over my skin, leaving behind 'black smudges' all over me, as though the entire surface of my body had already assumed the function of a seeing eye.

Or is it not possible to dream like a blind person after only four months? Our imaginations are so easily stimulated and so hard to control...

The accident was on 13 January this year. It happened so quickly that I hardly remember it. One terrible moment, just before impact, then a deafening sound like an explosion, a bang, in which my pain (there must have been pain) was lost. The door of a lorry parked on the pavement, with DOLLEVOET written on the side in huge letters, slammed into my face, just as I was looking curiously

up at the cab while trying to gauge the distance between the side of the lorry and the row of houses, on Erasmusplein. It wasn't even a proper accident with screeching tyres and lots of dents and damage, though there must have been a thrilling chaos of blood, a body falling to the ground, screaming, a stretcher, an audience. For me, there was only that one luminous moment, like the moment I've always dreaded when the railing of a balcony suddenly gives way under my weight; only in this case I didn't have any time to anticipate the impact.

Splinters of my frontal bone sliced through the optic nerves on both sides; nothing could be done about it.

Unless they quickly put a chip beneath my skull. The sentences I write still jolt and jerk, I realise, and their tone is rather abrupt, probably because every word has to be hammered into the paper with such tightly controlled force. The point of my stylus is as blunt as an embroidery needle and the handle is rough, to prevent it from slipping out of your fingers as you punch in the letters, but the friction still causes blisters and hard skin, particularly on the inside of the first joint of the middle finger, which controls the amount of pressure, balancing between the extremes of wasting energy and holding too much energy back. The rest of the stylus is smooth and hexagonal, with a clip so that I can attach it to my inside pocket or my shoulder bag, in the place where the case for my reading glasses used to go: a stylus with the charm of a cigarette holder, dancing in my hand. Already an essential accessory. Which is why I was so alarmed recently when the thing went missing for days, hiding between two pages of a Braille book, where, unnoticed as the ash leaves collected eight years ago in the 1908 medical encyclopaedia, it lay dreaming away without drying out until I happened to open the book.

After a few sentences of writing, I develop cramp, and have to shake my arm and let my fingers thrash about.

In hospital, my hand scribbled down the occasional note on old envelopes and train tickets, using a normal pen; these are still stored in my shoulder bag amongst the keys and the leather wallet containing my plastic cards – crumpled

souvenirs. Later I asked Don for sheets of paper, but scribbling on train tickets felt more appropriate for the situation and for the snatches of Marija Čudina's 'Sick Room' that floated in my memory, like fungal spores, so light, yet so concrete. 'A sick room is a chest whose lid appears to be open, just a little, but which is rooted deep in the Earth – actually a sick room is the bobbing raft of a castaway that very occasionally assumes the form of a chest that has been nailed tightly shut, bouncing over the waves of the empty ocean, further and further from the coast, the extremity of the earth's surface...'

Even now, the fine word needles of that long prose poem skilfully escape my awareness.

Finally, when I went home from the hospital, in a wheelchair, I left behind a small case on a table in the lobby with a rolled-up note inside – the case for my reading glasses, which I no longer needed anyway. 'To not lap up from the ground the honey drops that fall from the sun today.' Not a command, but an infinitive: the thinnest trace, tantamount to a thread of saliva left behind by a shadow.

Isn't it in a story by Apollinaire that a woman is freed from a convent thanks to a note hidden in a cigar? That's what we want: rescue as a response to a cry for help. But it's not always the right time for cries for help, let alone for rescuers.

When I was in hospital, I often thought of Fluxus artist George Brecht's water bottle, as described in the beautiful book I happened to have with me on the day of the accident, on my way to the station. George Brecht was supposed to receive that bottle in Rome in 1965 from his friend Ray Johnson in New York: a small, sealed bottle containing water from a New York ice cube. The label explained how the water could be turned into a Roman ice cube. But the bottle never reached George Brecht, according to the man who was supposed to hand it over in Rome, so the water inside did not turn back into ice, unless it froze during a chance cold snap – we could picture the rest of this incomplete journey for ourselves.

I am not exaggerating when I say that the flashing light of such ideas carried me through my time in the hospital. This was my refuge in the long hours I lay there in that bed, as though on display in a coffin, with that potato sack over my head: like counting from one to a billion, but using slightly more complicated methods. A perfectly ordinary, or maybe not so perfectly ordinary, concentration exercise in the windless heart of the pain and the fear. In the eye of the storm.

These notes too are intended mainly as an exercise in concentration.

When I used to read newspaper articles about blind people, I was always terribly curious about the answer to one question: how do they cope? The intention wasn't to blubber away about their misfortune. I wanted to know the ins and out of their experiences and research, grateful for every snippet of knowledge they offered me, genuine knowledge. No detail of their survival techniques ever bored me.

And so now it's my turn to try to keep a clear head.

I will not write: 'And then I screamed and screamed,' but instead: 'My stylus has a conical eraser on the end, no bigger than the head of a match, to rub out incorrect letters' – even though I may very well have screamed and screamed. So? Experience shows that scribbling down expressions of emotion, even in a more formal style, results in those emotions growing perniciously and becoming absolute.

I vaguely remember that this was not always the case. At least, in the past I sometimes found it less of an effort simply to give vent to my feelings, without inhibition. But recently... Sooner or later, we all lose our innocence, I suppose; one day, we press our feet to the globe while a storm of events blasts right through us, and, as it does, our attentive inner eye watches ourselves reel. One day, our youth is burnt and our first, innocent loves are burnt. Yesterday is burnt to make way for today and today is burnt for yet another day, and our eye watches, cool and detached. We must not flinch or falter.

At the Teahouse, where I worked before the accident, I saw our entire interior destroyed when our business was swallowed up into a chain of twenty-

seven completely identical Teahouses, a genuine disappearing act, in which we employees were also in a sense destroyed. But a few days later we were serving apple pie again in our brand-new surroundings.

If I were to write things like ‘What’s going to become of me?’, such a sentence would sound artificial to me, and yet at the same time it would exert a swamp-like suction, until I could no longer tear myself away from it. Such is the power of language and it is up to me cautiously to channel that power in another direction, away from myself.

Otherwise it’ll just be another spectacle.

Hysteria is already all around, a contaminating hysteria. There’s a good reason why my first sentence was: ‘To smell the rain coming!’ The most important thing now is to gather as many stimulating scraps of knowledge as I can: that will carry me over the abyss.

Since my first walk at night last month, here in my own neighbourhood, a new city has truly opened itself up, a new nocturnal universe that discreetly absorbs me, even though passers-by, in a sudden attack of helpfulness, call out: ‘A little to the left’ or ‘A little to the right’. Calm descends again the next moment. During the daytime, the streets would be too dangerous for me, mainly because I have a tendency to behave like a sighted person who just happens not to be able to see anything at the moment. This became painfully clear when I took my first trip out after my head injury healed, on Ingeborg’s arm, or rather, with my hand loosely on my friend’s shoulder so that I could feel all of her movements. I didn’t have a suitable walking stick at the time. I thought: she’ll lend me her eyes as we’re walking, without even noticing; I love her so much, it’ll be just as though we can see together; of course she’ll share her sight with me. It seemed so natural that her eyesight would extend to both of us and that, while I might not be able literally to see through her eyes, I still wouldn’t suffer any real deficiency or loss, thanks to our friendship, which goes back years.

We had agreed to take a walk along the canal to the west of the city, but before we’d even set off it started raining gently. So we decided just to walk

around the block and to spend the rest of the evening at the theatre café at the end of the road.

What a contrast between my serene dream state and harsh reality! After just a couple of steps under Ingeborg's direction, I lost all confidence in my own strength; my sense of direction vanished astoundingly quickly, along with my personality and my will to live. I was like an animated puppet walking beside Ingeborg, as she laughed and chatted away, giving me instructions about when to lift my foot up for the kerb. It must have been the pavement around Mariaplein with its benches and its sandpit and its basketball court, just two hundred metres behind my house – I didn't have a clue. In my mind's eye, I saw Ingeborg's teeth flashing as she said laconically, in exactly the right tone: 'Turn right here,' which, without a stick, meant making a turn into the void. She was specific enough, but I was a limp marionette, protected from the racing rush-hour traffic, but not from my own contempt.

Ingeborg was completely unaware; she led me to one of the benches on the square so I'd have some peace and quiet to taste the little sweet tomatoes and lychees that she'd brought along on our walk. Every Tuesday she looks after two groups of depressed residents in an old people's home and she manages to inspire a spark of interest in them by thrusting all sorts of objects into their hands and asking them to guess: what's this? The thought of their blank expressions ensures that she always turns up with something unusual, something to taste or to admire, something to stroke: a snail, pheasant feathers, a luminous picture from a jumble sale. After all, she'd managed to beat her own long-term depression by looking around with the curiosity of a child. Now she asked me too, as the juice dripped down my chin, mixing with the drops of rain: 'What's this?' – the usual brisk Ingeborg, of whom I was now a brainless appendage. I didn't see the funny side of her repeated, cheerful 'What's this?' until later. That's what happens when you promise to break someone's bones if she starts handling you with kid gloves!

'Let's just go home,' I suggested dolefully after we'd finished our walk around the block. 'That's enough for today.'

I decided at that moment that I would explore my surroundings on my own from then on and start doing so as soon as possible, at night, with a good walking stick.

And so now in the evening, for hours before I leave the house, I am consumed with a longing for space and new knowledge and fresh air and yet more space, a painfully throbbing, fearful desire that envelops my body in a corona of flames.

Now I have to take care not to smother the actual experience in beautiful words and potent stories, until I hardly feel the need to leave my chair, or even to move, with a profusion of phrases at my fingertips. That's why I'm not going to write anything on the day before a walk.

pages 82–91

Oven

This house would certainly have thicker walls and a better atmosphere if I hadn't started learning Braille. The old bookshelves still stand around me, silent witnesses, with their wonderful scent of dust and printed paper. An English friend, not a reader himself, always talked about 'your walls of confidence', and he meant it only slightly ironically. Not so long ago, I heard someone talking furtively about the complete library that he'd been able to buy from a man who had gone blind; he was rather ashamed about his bargain.

Over time, my Braille books, given how colossal they are, will naturally supplant the old book collection, and yet still I hope they don't; that rift with the past and with my reading environment really would be too great. Now I can still say to Ernst or Don, 'Take such and such a book by Mandelstam off the shelf. Page 16, I think.' Mandelstam in Braille is the translation of that book, but not the book itself. A very special kind of translation though, that's for sure.

Reading has become an even happier activity for me than before. But the Braille books have a dreamlike purity that makes them almost sacrosanct as objects; they don't smell; they all have the same format, the same layout and the same font size, the same thick paper, smooth and tough. No pictures, although you can order topographical maps of, for example, war zones from the library for the blind. You stumble into italics over the barbed wire of a simple preceding symbol, as in musical notation, which Braille in some respects resembles more closely than the alphabet. Not a single opportunity for diversion!

And as with some musical scores, Braille books contain an incredible number of misprints, probably because a system of dots or little balls and flags, sharps and flats, is a lot more difficult to master and to check precisely. The standards may be universal, but they are also rather esoteric, obscure. The Braille machine does not know what it is doing. There's also the fact that the Braille dots

are printed very unevenly on the paper, sometimes raised and pointed, then flat and wide, sometimes fat and swollen, then cursory, fleeting, as though the letters might blow off the page, just like that. Imagine a book where the ink's piled up in some places, while other places are deprived of ink, pale, almost unreadable.

Writing Braille yourself results in nice, regular sentences. That's how I really learned to read properly, by writing myself. Labels for household use and for CDs, shopping lists and stories and poems that I'd long ago learned by heart for emergencies were my practice material, along with these notes too, of course – so unruly in their shape, so knotty in their style, so hard on the muscles of the hand. But now I can certainly read.

The first passage I wrote from memory, even before I became a member of the library for the blind, was the beginning of Marina Tsvetaeva's 'The Flagellant Women' from a collection of the Russian writer's biographical and autobiographical prose, a most advanced tour de force for a fledgling reader, I realised, far too capricious and unpredictable. 'They existed only in the plural, because you never encountered them individually, but always in pairs, even if there was a single basket of strawberries, they came in pairs, a younger one and an older one, one who was a little younger together with one who was a bit older, because they were all of a certain collective age, the mean age lying between thirty and forty, and all had the same face, sunburnt, the yellow of amber, and from beneath the black edge of the same headscarf – white and woolly – one and the same collective eye scorched you, one and the same big brown eyelid swept downwards the feather duster of its lashes.'

Now that they were on paper, I barely recognised the sentences that I had so laboriously dug up out of my memory, and yet it was a fine beginning to my education: at least my memory didn't have to do all of the work on its own anymore. It was as though, from one moment to the next, it had been connected to a vast energy source. Merely re-reading the beginning of that brilliant story had the warming effect of firelight, of an oven.

Being read to never creates that sensation of becoming one with the text; even that faltering and halting reading, as though through a stratum of stones, is far superior to the languid comfort of a voice reading out loud; I admire and love its speed and ease (in the voices of my friends and Leda), but already I no longer understand it. Reading Braille demands such an intense collaboration between the senses of touch and hearing and the ability to interpret that in the beginning you can only guess, anticipate, according to a schema of fixed expectations and clichés you thought you had conquered long ago, which is stored somewhere in your brain but is now constantly confused by even the simplest of texts. This creates a passionate, all-absorbing concentration during reading, as you guess at the meaning of the hieroglyphs in front of you, at the course the sentences will take. If you didn't anticipate them so eagerly, the words would remain buried in the thick paper, stiff and dead. A poet is very familiar with that lightning-fast exploration of thousands of possibilities until he's found the right one, when he's looking for a rhyming word; as soon as every element of the sentence has finally fallen into place, he immediately recognises its pattern, previously hidden under grit, just as another person might recognise a face or a voice, as you might recognise an inscription after thick layers of dust and earth have blown away.

I've heard that, until recently, some cafés in town and the restaurant at the station used to have a Braille magazine for customers to read, a service for two or three regulars, which the Teahouse had dispensed with before I started working there sixteen years ago. At the library for the blind, they reacted with a little surprise when their latest member did not request audio books. 'Do you have a recorder?' they asked as soon as I enquired about membership, even before I'd finished speaking. Evidently the Braille book belongs to our collection of relics, along with the typewriter and the inkwell and names such as Nolda and Kobus.

One of the first questions everyone asks me is, 'Braille? Isn't that really difficult?', with a sigh of exhaustion, as though they've just heard that someone scrubs the streets of the city with a toothbrush, using soapy suds from a bottle top – a hopeless task. And sometimes it does feel like that; a fingertip isn't an eye

that's capable of taking in an entire sentence and the sentences around it and the layout of a whole page at a glance. But unlike a foreign language, the foundation of the grammar and idiom is already anchored in our brains, the word order remains unchanged: it is our own language, in an unfamiliar form, but otherwise the same –that's what lies behind the surprise as we read, the sensation. The familiar language has undergone a metamorphosis, beating me to it, as it were, a transformation that it will take me a lifetime to achieve myself. The brilliance of Louis Braille!

Right from the beginning, long rows of Braille words have been pushed past in front of me when I wake up in the morning, slowly, yet breathtakingly quickly, just reaching the point of gaining meaning, and then I feel my index finger, the reading finger, tingle. And when Koosje or Leda has left and I've got the worst jobs of the day out of the way, then it's reading time, always a moment of nervous anticipation. Is it going to work? The first sentences are almost as difficult as if I were trying to read them with my eyes; my fingertip still has that blindness of the beginning, it's still short-sighted, accustomed to rougher work, it doesn't discern any difference in the patterns. Dots of letters, punier than dust particles. But after a few sentences, the dots begin to swell until they flood my fingertip, the sign that the magic power of reading has started to work, even though it's a while before what I'm doing really is reading.

It's best to soak your hands in warm soda water first, so that the skin is soft enough and the nerves can be optimally stimulated. Even a macaroon with coffee makes your reading finger so inept that the letters virtually stick to the skin; even the tiniest amount of grease forms a repellent layer under which the text lies buried, until it becomes impossible to read a single word. Then you have to soak your hands in soda water all over again or, in an emergency, put them in your mouth and lick them clean.

The tactile sense of my left index finger actually works much more accurately. For the first few weeks, I automatically used my left hand, but unfortunately fine sensation is all that hand's good for. Otherwise, the left side

remains the unskilled side; I can't feel as well with the right, but I can interpret things far better, and that's what really matters, connecting the symbols you've felt with sounds and with meanings, all at the same time, in completely independent, but simultaneous processes. Feeling. Silently articulating sounds. Understanding. It took some time for me to become fully aware of the crucial role of hearing the sound within as a prerequisite for identifying the meaning, far more so than with reading with the eyes, which can take in large sections at once and do not require the continual production of sound for accurate orientation within the text. The sense of touch only involves one-way traffic and always falls short when it comes to speed and, in particular, agility; it is sounds that fill up those empty spaces, reinforcing the contact with the flow of words. The sounds do the same as eye movements; they gather together what remains separate after those one-dimensional touches of the hand. Only at this moment is the secret unveiled, the word, the sentence revealed. These are probably the same processes that occur automatically in normal reading, except for dyslexics with their fragmented decoding of a text, simultaneous, but not synchronous. Maybe they read the same way too, at different speeds.

What makes this reading such a joyful experience? Not just becoming reacquainted with a much-loved book, but also becoming entangled with it, until you're connected to it by a myriad of threads. That entanglement is absolutely essential; without familiarity with the quirks of the writing style I can scarcely make any headway in a book. I have to become better acquainted with books on every level, even ones I thought I knew very well. Otherwise reading remains too much a question of guessing and gambling. A stab in the dark.

Every Braille word should in fact be learned individually and patiently memorised, like Chinese characters. Knowing the letters doesn't mean knowing the words, and the words only become sentences when I'm able to write along with the book and become so intimately acquainted with its style that I can think a few steps ahead: that sentence length, that choice of words, those metaphors, this pace, those accelerations and decelerations. It's always a wonderful sensation

when, after a couple of volumes, the feverish guessing as to how a sentence will develop increasingly turns into knowledge, or at least stronger suspicion, so that I recognise the word characters faster and with fewer remaining vestiges of doubt, and the sentences order themselves into a somewhat smoother cadence. Which isn't an unmitigated joy when it comes to a dull book: for all its familiarity, it just becomes even more boring. Saramago's *Blindness*, my first Braille book enchanted me until the author's technique became obvious and the iron fist of his clichés raced me through the book; the book essentially read itself, without my help, without my involvement. Such a quick conquest isn't exactly the intention either.

Then I'd rather read the monthly magazine from the library for the blind, also full of clichés, gathering news in the best journalistic tradition, with words such as 'electricity cables' and 'water-treatment plant' silting up the lines, and percentages and dates that are impossible to decode: the numbers are the same as the first ten letters of the alphabet, with a special symbol in front, and they form random patterns that are enough to drive you crazy. Numbers in Braille always seem like foreign bodies, tiny monsters, written in a different code than the rest, eternally unfamiliar, unpredictable, impenetrable, soulless too, in their stone infinity. I tend to skip them so I can maintain contact with the living text. The brain finds it difficult to process such an abrupt code switch; that's the problem, not the symbols themselves. The individual page numbers don't cause any confusion, even though they too reveal their secrets less readily than words. They remain (in a way that I could never have imagined, sometimes pleasantly, sometimes unpleasantly) cold.

That abrupt chilling and freezing of the flow of words beneath my finger when I reach a number briefly lends the whole Braille system a hieratic character: the writing of a caste, haughty and unfathomable, 'a script on its throne', the cuneiform of the powerful, it seems, but the warm gulf stream of the sentences around it immediately eases my increasing despondency about the impenetrability of the system. I never feel closer to the illiterate, with their heads full of

untameable language, than at that moment of freezing, and when a little later that one word magnetically attracts another again, I can still feel, through the chinks and gaps, the hard skeleton of a reality that is retreating ever further, just as in the first few weeks after the accident I could feel the carved decorations of my old walking stick, which I was using temporarily as a white stick: in spite of their familiarity, they left me dangling in monumental uncertainty.

When I'm reading (less so during other activities), I slowly become accustomed to grasping dramatically at nothing, touching at most the aura of things, not the things themselves.

The second Braille book I read, by Maurice Gilliams, presented me with enormous technical problems, but the world of his Elias was so in keeping with the laborious process of deciphering that, right from the first page, the book seemed to be written in Braille, in which your body crawls and your thoughts fly, at odds with each other, in an eternal pursuit of greater unity. Here, my slow reading speed was entirely appropriate, not the grappling with so many unusual words (always shifting, stubbornly unpredictable), but rather the unhurried, steady progress of the hand over the paper – the tenacious tortoise that ultimately outlasts everyone else. Somewhere it says something like, 'No power in the world could get him to work': a concise summary of his (both Elias's and Gilliams's) temperament. This does not indicate a tendency to procrastination or time-wasting, or idleness, but rather an urge that never rests. An effort, the effort that the reader of his small book, now expanded into five volumes, knows very well. On every page, I cursed the writer: bastard, making me work so hard, haven't I been fumbling around in the darkness for long enough? His recalcitrant language kept me at the guessing and gambling stage until almost the end; even when the cadence of the sentences became familiar, I still could hardly manage to fill in the gaps, too difficult. Sometimes, the next day, I asked Leda to look up a passage, but it's actually nice that a book can sometimes open itself up to you and then close itself again.

Upon a second reading, it was suddenly no longer necessary to slog away at the difficult passages.

This second pass at the book tides me over in the long interval between two parcels from the library for the blind, which for obvious reasons doesn't lend us its books, but gives them to us instead.