



K. Schippers

Where Were You

WAAR WAS JE NOU ('Where were you') is filled, as so often in Schippers' books, with parallel worlds. On the very first page, for instance, we meet a Turkish grocer who understands Dutch only when he's in his shop but not when he's outside; in Schippers' uni-

verse only artists are capable of bridging two such worlds.

The novel begins when Ruud, the main character, closes the door behind him, then realises that he's left his keys inside. He goes to his late mother's house and examines her photographs (she was a keen amateur photographer). He sees sand whirling, hears kites flapping, and shoes clip-clopping. As he looks at certain images, he enters the photograph, cautiously at first, and as his adult self. He tries a croquette; it is spicier than today's bland version, and afterwards is able to return to the present by assuming the position of the photographer. But he takes increasingly greater risks: at one point he decides to try to bring back his mother's brooch. That takes him back to the age of eleven and he is able to re-live a special night he spent with Chris, one of his mother's girlfriends.

As we have come to expect from Schippers, objects play an important role: the Blue Tram to the seaside town of Zandvoort, movie posters, the lettering on a lunchroom window. Through the extensive use of the *monologue intérieur* and the shifts between present and past, sea dunes and city street, film and reality, Schippers has created a dreamy, magical atmosphere, without actually breaking the bond with reality.

Ruud tries to get back to the present, with the help of two vaudeville artistes – past masters at pulling the wool over people's eyes. He goes to see Buster Keaton in *Sherlock Jr.*, and suddenly sees his own photography shop on the screen. He tries to jump into the canvas image, just like Keaton, but something goes wrong. After getting back together with Chris, he decides to stay there. He's been locked out. He cannot go back, but he doesn't mind.

If there is a message in this novel, then it is that art – in this case, literature – makes it possible to do what so many people wish they could do: bring back the past. *Where were you* is a nostalgic novel, full of yearning for a time long past.



photo Roeland Fossen

K. Schippers (b. 1936) is a versatile author: he writes poetry; *Een leeuwerik boven een weiland* ('A lark over a meadow', 1996), stories and essays (*De vliegende camera*; 'The flying camera', 2003), and novels (*Zilah*, 2002). *Waar was je nou* won the Libris Literature Prize for 2006. The jury called the novel 'the high point of Schippers' rich oeuvre'.

K. Schippers, one of the founders of the literary journal *Barbarber*, often focuses on the unusual in everyday life, at looking carefully at the everyday world till it becomes fresh once more. In 1996 he was awarded the P.C. Hooft Prize for his entire oeuvre.

Schippers has succeeded in re-creating the past in language. His cautious but telling evocation of what photographs can capture in mere seconds of a human life, each second with a past and a future, is literature of the highest order. This is why writers write.

TROUW

Schippers demonstrates what a novel – at its best – is capable of. It not only recounts, it also ponders, imagines, dances, plays, and sings.

JURY REPORT, LIBRIS LITERATURE PRIZE

Waar was je nou is a thought experiment (...) a masterpiece you will gaze at in breathless admiration. How does he do it? Where is the double lining, the secret compartment in the trunk, the mind-reader's prompter? *Waar was je nou* is a fairy tale you can step into, a swirling fun-fair, and you must stay on until the end of the ride. DE VOLKSKRANT

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Sample Translation

Where were you

(Waar was je nou)

by K. Schippers

(Amsterdam: Querido, 2005)

Translated by Rhian Heppleston

Live photos

Slim doesn't know what time she's getting up and neither do I, we had a really late night. She's maybe jetlagged; she only got into town a few days ago for work, a contract with some musician. She's a really good impresario, worked with singers like Nellie Rose and Coralie Dujardin, open to anything.

I have a shave, take a shower; the firm pressure of the water on my head really hits the spot after a night's heavy drinking.

Maybe I could go get her some breakfast from the baker's on the corner. Always wanted to do it for it for myself sometime but never quite got round to it. One of those paper bags with a smiley baker on the front. What would be inside: a croissant, couple of sandwiches, orange juice probably, in a plastic cup with a lid.

I'm standing on the pavement, pulling the door shut behind me. And in the split second before the catch falls it dawns on me. I've left my keys behind – strange how you still have time for that, how you're totally aware of your loss before you hear the door click into place, how you even have time to realize that there's nothing more you can do about it. The keys are inside, and the door's shut.

They're where I always put them on top of the washing machine. Bit of a strange place perhaps but what else are you supposed to do with them. Before you know it, you've got no 'safe place' and they end up lying all over the house; every time you want to go out it's a major search operation.

I pull on the door handle; give it a gentle push, in the vain hope the door will somehow open by itself.

'Can't you get in,' calls a boy, cycling on the pavement.

Should I ring the bell? Then I'd wake her up, but she might not even hear it. I'm better off going to the baker's first, in the meantime the whole issue will have sorted itself out.

Locked out, that's never happened to me before. I glance at my watch, it's not there, forgotten that as well. It's later than usual. The girls from the hairdressing college are already gone; I'd normally see them as I'm leaving, hanging about with a cigarette in their hands, maybe a lollipop or a stick of rock.

Out on the main street, I start thinking about a friend of mine. Two reporters came for an interview one day. He put the coffee on and suddenly said: I just need to go and get some cigarettes. Once outside, he just didn't feel like it anymore, couldn't be bothered with the whole interview. Didn't come back, spent hours wandering around town.

Maybe she'll be awake by the time I get back with breakfast. But how am I to know that? And imagine if she wakes up in the meantime, what are the chances she's already left? As she kept saying, she hadn't come to town for the heck of it, had all sorts of things to do today, like contracting a musician.

The pre-packed breakfast bags stand upright at the left end of the counter, I'm in luck, three left. What am I worrying about, anyway? I'll soon be tucking into a great breakfast. No work today, just meeting my sister later.

Is the clothing shop up for sale? That shop must have been there for years, you can tell from the brown panelling, they don't make that kind anymore. But there it is, clear as day, a huge brightly coloured sign over the shop window saying 'Closing Down Sale'.

Have I got any oranges or bananas back home? Another thing I didn't pay any attention to as I was leaving. They're good for breakfast and my Turkish grocer-cum-baker-cum-veggie man is just around the corner. As long as his brother isn't there, otherwise it'll be a right game of charades: he doesn't speak a word of Dutch.

There's my house. She probably thinks I've left for the day. Whatever, it's been a good fifteen minutes at least; I ring the doorbell. Short, not too loud. Nothing happens. If she's already left it'll mean a whole new lock. No one has a copy of my keys. I don't know where she's gone, don't even know how well she knows the city or which hotel's she at, didn't say.

I lean against the door. Ring the bell again, a bit longer this time, nothing. What was she wearing yesterday? A dress, I saw it just a few hours ago in the early morning light. What was the pattern? Floral, I think, what kind of flowers were they again? A pearl necklace? Or was it a bracelet that I somehow remember being around her neck?

Here's the post, the young girl with the little red cart full of letters. She knows me and walks over smiling.

She removes the elastic band and checks the numbers. I take my letters, hold them loosely in my free hand and shuffle through them casually as if I know exactly what I'm going to do with them. She's about to move on.

'Did you see anyone coming out of my house?' I ask.

She looks at me nonplussed.

'When?'

'When you were across the street.'

'I'm just watching for the numbers.'

I wish she'd move on now, don't particularly want her to see me hovering around my own door like this. She senses there's something amiss. I can see it in her eyes.

'Are you looking for somebody,' she asks.

'No, no. Have you had breakfast yet?'

'At this time? I'm going for my lunch...'

'Take this then.'

I give her one of the breakfast bags. She takes it and looks at me with the bewildered look of someone who has no idea what's going on but thinks: why not.

'Thanks.' She's never been this informal with me; this little gift changes the dynamic, I guess. Don't ask anymore questions, she thinks, and walks on with her little red cart.

I flick through the post. Letters from the taxman, credit card bills and a handful of other notices of a less pressing nature.

I slip two handwritten letters in my coat pocket. What am I supposed to do with the rest?

I try the bell one more time. I then put the rest of the post through my letterbox and head off down the street with my oranges, bananas and breakfast rolls.

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I do find a key in one of my coat pockets in the end, a spare one my mother gave me when she became ill. The same as the one on my key ring. I open the door and go up some marble steps to a small lift. This is where my mother lived till she died half a year ago. This building with its thirteen flats must date back to the Twenties. The lift has never been replaced. There are black scratches on the panelling.

My sister Trudy and I haven't cancelled the rent yet. We thought it would be better to do the inventory in the house. We've got dozens of boxes and a few suitcases waiting in the hall. That's where we're storing her letters and photos. She was a photographer herself, had a darkroom too. There are dozens of photos from both her youth and ours.

In the living room I put the oranges and bananas into an empty bowl. The thing looks lost, as if it'll never be used again, but for today it's playing host to another bowl's fruit. I put the bag of breakfast things alongside.

As I make my way into the study the telephone rings. Trudy, no, she can't come today. She takes her work as a psychiatrist very seriously and has taken on some extra appointments. Since we come here so often, it's okay to cancel if it suits one of us better. And right now it suits me very well. Forgetting my house-keys and the whole Slim story; I'd no doubt have mentioned it to her, prompting a wave of advice, and we'd never have got down to work.

I phone my house. Slim doesn't pick up. It's been about an hour and a half since I locked myself out. She probably left ages ago. I don't have her mobile number. We were together the whole time, why should I think to ask her.

I take a seat at a long table. We've been making some real headway, sorting the photos into different decades. I recognised most of the people at parties and birthday gatherings, up to the point when I left home. Almost all are gone now. Strange, how I can still see them so vividly in front of me. Hardly any different from those still around, like Slim.

There to the right, at the edge of the table, lies the most curious batch of all. People Trudy and I can't place. The hair, eyes and posture – none of it means anything to us. Strangers my mother would have recognised at a glance. Now there's no one around to talk about them.

If the people are in my mother's company we can usually put a name to them. There's that picture of her on the shoreline with her friend Chris, who's bending down with a shell in her hand. The redness of her lips almost bleeding through the grey of the photo. With her fractionally too wide nose beneath those pale eyebrows, she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen when I was a boy.

'Leave it,' says my mother.

'But it's a beautiful one of you.'

'We've got so many already.'

I can still hear their voices. My mother's never leaves me, Chris' neither, nor her happy face.

I stand up, at that point Trudy always tells me to 'sit back down for a bit'. Where's the brooch, or at least a photo of my mother wearing it; that brooch looked great on her. Sometimes she'd lend it to Chris. I've been looking for it for days.

There's a brass tin, probably an old one from a bakery. I prise the lid off: it's really stiff. There they are, twelve or so wallets. We put them in the tin, before that they were lying all over the house on shelves and in drawers.

How long does a wallet last you, about four years? Faded reds, browns and yellows, home to all those leftover bits and bobs like receipts, woollen threads, a couple of coins, a tiny key.

There's my mother sitting at a large desk. She's wearing a black-and-white check skirt and white shoes, more the kind of shoes you'd expect to see someone playing tennis in, not wearing to work.

There's an Underwood typewriter on the desk. I look at the photo through a magnifying glass. A rocker blotter for the wet ink, a box of paperclips, nice and full, I can see them shining, and a rubber stamp of a company whose name I can't make out.

Looks as if she has a pretty important job. No, she told me how it went.

'Me first.'

'No, me.'

'Hang on.'

'The photographer'll be here any minute.'

'Hey, who's been working here the longest.'

The girls jostled with each other to have the first turn occupying the boss' desk. It needed to look as if everyone here had a first-class job.

I try phoning again; no Slim. I feel as if she's my boss and I'm bunking off work; should be looking for her, no right to be doing anything else, not supposed to be here. I run to the tram stop. The tram comes immediately. Ten minutes later and I'm back on my own doorstep.

Can keep ringing that bell all you like, no one's going to let you in. Just get yourself to the key cutters and the whole problem will be solved in a couple hours. I hesitate. I've just recently had the locks changed, got such a nice shiny strip to cover the entire length of the lock.

Had she maybe seen the key lying on top of the washing machine and handed it in at the café on the corner? I pop my head in the door and ask the bar owner. He shrugs.

I suppose I could try the shop; a large photo business on a filled-in canal in the middle of town. How am I going to play it, though? I took today off because of Slim. If I turn up now, I'll just be asked a whole load of questions.

There's the clothing store where Frits tried on that suit. Did he end up buying it? Something odd in the window catches my eye. A white box with collars sticking out, just like the ones worn by men in the old photos. I must have missed them this morning. Spare collars for a guilder a piece.

The tall proprietor tells me they're from the stockroom. He doesn't mention the velvet-corduroy suit and I don't ask. The collars had been lying there for over seventy years. He happened to find them on a shelf during the clearance sale, were never got rid of.

We take a look at a couple of the boxes, fingering the collars. They're made of starched paper. Every collar with the Wings brand has a little oval hole for attaching it to the shirt.

A note in the bottom says, 'Packer 2, if faulty, please return this control slip'. To think how much has happened in the world these past seventy-odd years while all this time the box of collars has been patiently awaiting a customer.

They're not even that nice. I must have them, even though I've no idea why. He sells me five and throws in one for free, the box included.

Could Slim have called the shop? I'd better drop by. It's not far. I generally check all the photos before they go into the packets anyway. There's always a chance of finding some curious shot. Not so long ago, we had one of a woman at the seaside roaring with laughter.

'Hurry up, will you.'

'Hang on,' says the photographer.

'This is so unlike me to be on a beach...Laughing by myself...laughing...'

I can always tell what someone's saying during a shot, trick of the trade, and yet the person could just as well have been in a completely different setting. There's something arbitrary about every photo.

There's a heron perched on the roof of a car. Soon to be a common enough sight, those birds have become really tame. But now it looks like it belongs in a scene with

the white collars and the door incident. This is silly, comes from wandering around for so long during the day; it's not like me.

'You here after all, Ruud?' Lola the senior shop assistant asks. No, Slim hasn't phoned. Lola says there have been some business calls, and there are letters needing replies. I read the names, routine stuff, they can wait. Wim, the other assistant, is taking passport photos of a woman in a head scarf. He's good at it, has a courteous manner.

I follow Lola behind the curtain into the studio. She's preparing to photograph a family of four against an East-Indies backdrop: a stream, the greenest trees and lianas. How tense the mother looks. I tap Lola on the shoulder and get behind the camera.

'Say something,' I say.

'Like what,' asks the father.

'Doesn't matter, anything.'

I wait a little, watching their faces and how they carry themselves. The way they are just now, there's not much to see. If they'd start a conversation it could all magically change.

'How much longer,' asks the boy.

This is it, I can sense it.

'I'm hot,' says the little girl.

'Come here,' says the mother. She stoops to straighten the child's blouse.

The boy goes over to the water.

'Not so close,' says the father.

They're really in the East Indies now, no longer in my studio, perfect, caught it on film. A photo with sound; isn't supposed to exist, but here it does.

With a chivalrous sweep of the arm, I make way for Lola and give the family a cheerful nod. Four backdrops; take your pick, all Indonesian. That's what they all come for. Everybody wants to step back into the past. I've had enough for now, though.

I tell Lola I just happened to be in the area. I'll maybe drop by my mother's house while I'm at it. She knows why I've been spending so much time there lately. If it gets late, I'll spend the night there.

Why am I telling her all this? I ask myself once I'm back outside. I've not decided anything yet, covering my back no doubt, in case anyone tries to reach me at home.

I turn round and take a look at my window display, the box of collars under one arm. There's a blow-up of a duck in a tub hanging behind a sheet of glass. Doesn't matter what you put up there, as long as it makes people stop and wonder why it's there. Best is black-and-white. Attracts lots more attention than colour.

Further down on the main shopping street there used to be the big Galeries Modernes department store which sold everything. And right beside it a shop with a colour photo of a man in the window that moved. Walking past, you actually saw him winking at you, very briefly, with a puckered eyebrow. After a great deal of searching, I managed to find one. I have it in my own shop now.

Across the street there used to be a place where they sold ice-cream in the summer and fur coats in the winter. The switch always came as a surprise.

My parents, John and Leida, were mad about film and photography. There should be a film somewhere, with them in dinner jacket and a long evening dress with blue frills coming down a marble staircase in an old building with white pillars. The Film Museum's there now.

I love those captured moments, yet I always wonder: which particular scene is worth the effort? The black-stockings above the table perhaps – wait – there's another woman standing next to a man in jeans. He sits at the bar, she's chattering away at him.

'She was always such a mess.'

'Who cares,'

'Could've been worse if she'd had it together.'

Why doesn't she sit down? She kisses him on the forehead, looks like she's saying goodbye, what's she doing, walking over to a small table to take an order. She works here. The stockings or that couple at the bar, say you were to take a photo, how are you supposed to choose between the two?

It would be difficult getting the scene with the couple all in one shot, there's simply too much going on, even in such a simple interaction. The cemetery where I sometimes go to visit my parents' grave springs to mind. The other day a gardener was collecting up the flowers that had been on the graves for too long.

He walked over to an aluminium rubbish cart and dumped the flowers along with all their good intentions. Before dropping them into the cart, he gathered them together in a bunch, as if floral tributes still ought to look smart when consigned to the darkness.

It's impossible to capture such things in a photograph, you have to be there, that's the shortcoming of my trade. I leave it up to the punters, and just wait and see what peculiarly truncated images they bring in for developing. The wing of a plane, dunes with specks on them which you can't tell are people, a headless body. And then their crestfallen faces when there's nothing to be seen at all, as if they've been duped by life itself.

Photos are a comfort, that's all, the chance to immortalise some vestige of a unique, transitory moment. That's what they're after.

I dunk my bread in the gravy on my plate. What a fantastic steak, mop up the last dregs, don't want to miss any of it. Take the door action this morning, for example, with Slim oblivious to it all upstairs in bed. All be sorted out soon, but without any photographic record; how could there be.

The lamps are on in the street where my mother used to live. They remind me of Magritte's nights. The same yellowish white glow that doesn't stop at the glass lampshade. The light radiates beyond, diffused, heeding no perimeters. It's darker near the ground than in the sky. It's already evening but the clouds are still in bright daylight. A section of the street has been dug up, red-and-white barriers have been

placed around the holes. There's sand around the outside as well, and here and there mud from the underground water, often happens. Better watch out for my socks, and my shoes. I can get past over there, on the right.

I was just talking to Slim yesterday about my mother's photos. Dump the whole lot in the bin, she said, they're no use to anyone now, and chuck in all the policies and paperwork too. Otherwise, your kids are going to have to take care of all that later. Got no kids, I said, don't want any either. According to Slim, you don't always get a say in the matter.

Inside, I eat a banana. Trudy's not been here; the ashtrays are empty. We both smoke like chimneys. Slim prefers not to be in the same room as us anymore. I need to get rid of the smoke later, she says. She gets that from New York. She lived there for a year.

I switch on a lamp. There are two cameras on the table of things still to be sorted. I put the box of collars next to them, in front of the piles of my parents' acquaintances we can't identify.

The more basic of the two cameras must be very old. My mother got it as a gift for saving up enough tokens from Sunlight-soap, as she told me a hundred times.

I run my fingers over the black camera. It's a Kodak 620. It's still in working order. But vintage nostalgia isn't my thing. I don't even put antique cameras in my window displays, however stunning they may be.

The camera's got a lovely feel to it, has the lightest of ridges. 'Six-20 Target Hawk-Eye', it says on the strap. And then the smell, somewhere between tobacco and pepper. I can see our living room before me, the light beam from the projector, with specks of dust you never saw otherwise dancing in its rays. Laurel & Hardy and Chaplin, films my father would bring home from work.

The feel, the smell of the camera, the enchantment of the projector. Perhaps that's what inspired me to set up my shop. Something mysterious had been nestling inside me, without my being aware of it.

The other model looks flashier. It's a Reflecta, a brand that stood the test of time. Two lenses, for focusing and light, and a milky-white viewfinder found by clicking back a few ingenious protective flaps. Trudy must have scratched our address into the leather case, I've only just noticed; I recognise her handwriting.

There are the photos that still need going through, all jumbled together, awaiting their boxes. How odd to see them lying so close to the very cameras my mother used for taking them.

At first Trudy and I wanted to sort them by subject. Lots of beach scenes, in excellent focus, no retouch needed; that's something we also do, I run a very big business. Then the photos of groups, celebrations, dinner parties, culminating in the picture of a very long dinner table. There's no end to it, with fifteen people on either side, all looking at the camera, every single face visible.

Sorting them by subject like that would have been fun. Still, we went for chronological order. Means you can find a particular photo more quickly.

How vivid that beach scene is. There's a sandy path sloping upwards from the beach to the boulevard. And there's Aunt Gré with a beach bag and her daughter Inge. They turn round and smile at Matti. I've lost count of the number of times we stayed at the coast with friends of my parents' and their children. I probably wasn't old enough to be taken to the beach along with them in this one.

It must be warm. Little Matti still has on his socks and shoes. His mother beckons.

'Are you coming.'

'Want to go in the sea.'

'Not right now.'

'Again.'

'I don't think so, young man.'

'Want to go in the sea.'

The telephone goes a few rooms down. Who can it be, my mother's not lived here for ages. And if it's Trudy or Slim, they'll just have to wait.

Matti's socks are so sharply defined. My mind goes back to the exhibition I saw in Bonn on stereoscopy and other optical innovations from the nineteenth century, went there for my work. Everything at that show, even the most insignificant-seeming event, was given the allure of a well-considered sculpture, as if the weeds between the stones, the accretions of mud in the gutter, the light reflecting on the leaf of a tree, had all been staged.

How close Matti is on the beach, no need for a magnifying glass. Then I recall another picture from Bonn. A street urchin from 1902 looking at me from a short way off. His knee-socks had fallen down, making shapeless bunches round his ankles. I didn't just observe that detail, it was as if I could feel it.

Observing had become photosensitive touching. The eye followed a curve, that was it, even felt the twists at the back. That's how water flows past a jutting rock, it makes contact with the entire circumference. And that's how it was for me in Bonn: be it a piece of bark or leather, paper or zinc, my gaze was continually on the move. Everything with a pronounced skin could be stereoscopically grasped.

The photo of Aunt Gré with her two children on the sandy path is right in front of me. It has a serrated edge, something you don't see anymore. I run my fingertips across the sand, hear the sound of waves breaking on the shore, brush across the yawning sky, and plunge my hand into the shimmering heat.

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A kite shoots into the sky. Matti doesn't see it. The sea, the sea, that's where he wants to be. It's so funny how he says it, and again when he's sitting with his mother and sister on the boulevard.

'Go and sit on that low wall.'

'Where'

'Here, where you always sit.'

'Want to go in the sea.'

‘We need to get home.’

‘We don’t.’

‘Come on, get your shoes on.’

‘Later.’

‘But that’s the part you like best.’

The kite’s flying high, you can hear it flapping in the wind. Matti’s not paying attention. He’s watching the sea while slowly loosening a shoelace, painfully slowly, in a last-ditch attempt to escape the route prescribed by others.

In the distance there are lots of children on the beach, high-pitched voices lightly echoing. Matti turns a sock inside out, like he’s been taught, and shakes the sand out. Now the shoe, he taps the toe. Out comes the sand. Blowing everywhere.

Inge starts running, very fast, she knows exactly where she’s heading. Clumpy sandals on her feet, wooden soles. The flapping kite, thin voices, clattering soles; they give the sky above the coast such depth and create a seemingly endless expanse. Sounds fused with the shimmering light.

Inge just keeps on running, perhaps it’s a game. She brushes past a man in a trilby. He just manages to move out of the way in time, she’s running so fast that one echo overlaps the other. None of the steps are given time to fully resound.

Back in the room, despite the clarity on the beach, my thoughts are blurred: spent too long on that beach scene. This is more than just sorting. It was as if the photograph was on the move, had had enough of the little group on the sandy path and went off under its own steam to find what happened next, what was going on in the surrounding area.

There’s another photo I’ve been hunting for ages, just suddenly turns up: my mother with Chris and another friend I don’t recognise. They’re either walking across a square or towards one. It’s hard to make out the road surface, asphalt or cobblestones.

I smooth out a fold. Yes, she's wearing it, the brooch, a parrot made from a blue gemstone with a ruby on its head. Seen it so many times in real life, I'm adding the colours myself; they're difficult to make out in black-and-white, you can only see the variations in shade.

What's it worth, I wonder? My mother was always pretty secretive about that. Oh, come now, I'm not interested in the price. The brooch forms part of a memory I've never yet shared with anyone.

I pick up the magnifying glass, don't really need it but perhaps I've missed some other detail. My mother's walking in the centre of the photograph, the sunlight sparkling in the ruby. One hand in her pocket, I wonder which of the wallets out of the tin she's touching. The shabby blue one, with a tram ticket inside. Skirt above the knee, head tilted at a funny angle in Chris' direction.

'It says so in *Cinema & Theater*,' says my mother.

'You're joking,' says Chris.

The rhythm of friends, tightly arm in arm: feels nice walking like that, more than just friendship, as if you're helping them walk with a lighter step, not quite lifting.

'*Dreamtime*, Lillian Bowles,' continues my mother.

'You'll never get tickets,' says Chris.

The clicking of heels after a heavy downpour; didn't know that street had been tarmacked by then. The friend I don't recognise looks on in amusement, as if thinking: what's that she's saying, a new Bowles, definitely not missing that.

'No tickets? They're doing advanced bookings,' says my mother.

'Where?' asks Chris.

'Further along, in the new V&D department store, near the canal.'

'We could go and get them now,' says the second friend.

They cross the road, passing a man in a trilby heading in the opposite direction. I recognise the second friend now after all, seen her at our house once, I think.

They're almost at the other side, watch out, a taxi with a black-and-white stripe drives past through a puddle. Water splashes everywhere and now they do what everybody does after a near miss: they walk on very quickly, looking over their shoulder, the head turned so far round it looks as if it can't keep pace with the rest of the body.

I move to a table covered with objects from my parents' house. A charming little funnel, dented enamel with a blue rim. Drinking glass in a holder. Pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: a huge field, cows, blue sky – too few, will never be able to put it together again. Father's dinner jacket, what are you supposed to do with those kinds of things. An extending tripod, with long legs. A blue dress with frills, lots of jewellery. And having just seen the brooch with the ruby glinting on a street corner, I start looking for the parrot again.

I do find two round brooches, similar in style, green and brown mother-of-pearl with flowers. She always used to buy those in the posh shop. They have a dignified gleam. A reddish purple flower blossoms out of a green relief. I'd seen that piece of jewellery before on a passport photo and at a party with dinner jackets and evening gowns. The photo must have been taken the same night as that missing film, the one of my parents coming down that marble staircase.

Have I got mud on my trousers? I run my palms over them. Still feels a bit wet and yet it hasn't rained in days. There's sand between my shoelaces, a few grains of sand on my socks as well. Could have sworn I'd walked around that red-and-white barrier, didn't set foot on the dug-up street. Must have done, it was probably too dark.

Funny, I'm searching this room all over for a parrot that I can simply touch in a photo. I run a finger over the three women. Which photo do you take, friends in a square, or in a street. How did my mother manage to make that decision over and over again, or someone else if she was in the photo herself.

And who took it? Wouldn't have been a passer-by, you didn't ask that kind of thing in those days. A third friend perhaps, 'you take this one and I'll take one of the pair of you later.'

Why did she take a photo of the tram stop? I pick it out of a pile. There are a few people waiting. No one I know, no friends, no family members. Two women, a man with a hat. Passers-by, otherwise so easily forgotten, fixed in time.

Must have been the last photo, doesn't matter what it is, just finishing off the roll. And in fact, it's actually very realistic: a traffic island with a scattering of people, a tram approaching. The city's full of these vignettes. Moments without heroes, without a climax, no need to fix them in your memory.

You can see them here. There's the tram, a piercing blast, don't hear that in the city anymore. You can hop on the rear platform, need to be pretty quick about it though, otherwise the tram's gone.

The door has a funny little hatch that opens. Passengers on the rear platform can stick their tickets through if there's no room further in and the conductor will punch it for them. No need for that anymore: not enough passengers. Just as long as the bridge isn't open, or is it as long as the bridge isn't closed – old dilemma. 'I had a bridge,' my friend would say when he arrived late for school.

No, the tram's not slowing down. The bridge is open/closed and there, just over the bridge, is the spot where I jumped out the time I didn't have a ticket and the conductor was bearing down on me.

Another passenger, a man with a long neck, is wearing a hat. Next to him a man wearing a wing collar just like the one I bought today in the sale.

There's where my father always used to buy croquettes. A mark on the window pane is obscuring the view, I try rubbing it off. It works, the mark's gone, and then it hits me how real the glass is, as if until now I didn't want to believe that *I'm actually sitting in the tram.*

Give the glass another rub? No need, the mark's gone. Sickmann's croquette shop is miles behind us now. The tram has come to a halt, the conductor pulls the bell and we're off again and still I feel I'm just imaging it all.

The brim of my trilby pulled further down my forehead, I'm riding illegally and it's best I'm not recognised. I see myself in the window, the coat and the hat, should I jump out now. It'll never work, the conductor's coming.

'Ticket, please,' he says with a voice echoing of yesteryear. I search for the paper in my wallet, wrong ticket, wrong money, I give a questioning shrug of the shoulders.

'You'll have to get off the tram,' he says firmly, the whole tram can hear. No one gets a free ride, accusing eyes bore into me. A traffic island suddenly comes into sight, I cross the road, no zebra crossing, walk down a street you'd normally only see in black-and-white. It's bathed in colour. Transport bikes, push bikes, now and again a car, streamlined, a fancy dancer or an aeroplane on the bonnet. No automobiles like you see in the old comedies.

There's the gallery made of glass and wrought iron. I walk past a lunchroom I'd once been to with my father. It must be even earlier than that because it's still the *noenzaal* (noon-room), years before English became so common-place here.

The bicycle bells, the odd horn, it all sounds so clear, as if it's your first time – you're all jittery, it's stimulating your senses too acutely. Weeds between the paving stones. The burgundy coloured boot swinging on a sign outside the shoemaker's. Even the most insignificant event exhibits a relentless power impossible to ignore.

Past one more canal and there on the corner is the marble white building that used to be the bank. My father went to work there after leaving school aged about seventeen; went straight into stocks and shares. The giro bank came much later. That's when they pulled down the marvellous interior with its wide door frames, mirrors and brown panelling.

That must still be there now. I hardly dare admit it to myself for fear of breaking the rules, daring to turn back the clock. The building looms into view, whiter than I've ever known. Years of traffic pollution have since coloured the marble grey.

It almost looks as if the bank is propped up with posts, as if it's just a façade, like the set of an opera. As I pass underneath I trace the wall with my finger, just as I did on the window of the tram. No backdrop, every bit of it real; in a Fritz Lang film a woman pinched her cheek to check she really existed.

From the bridge you can see the palace. Behind me is the bank, I turn around. The fore wall with the entrance and next to it a couple of steps leading up to some open doors. I know what goes on here. In a short film my father made, you see dozens of workers. One by one, coming out of a deep basement. Pushing their bikes, they wave at the camera.

A group of men are approaching the bridge, laughing merrily. It's just gone one according to the round clock on the street lamp. A gold watch chain glints in the sunlight. 'Shell and Phillips shares,' says a small man. He still has the stock exchange badge on his lapel. 'They're on a real roll, today,' says the tall man with the watch chain. I take a few steps to the side.

In his enthusiasm, the young man drops an oblong notebook. It slips out of his hand. I catch it, just before it has time to slip between the railings of the bridge.

He looks at me in surprise. I return the notebook. It's open, just rows numbers.

'Thank you, thank you.'

He catches up with the others. They're on their way back from the stock exchange and are about to go indoors, I flee into the here and now. The man with the watch chain glances over the frosted glass into the consulting room to see who's in a meeting. He goes through a different door, takes a seat and begins working on the market orders. There's a framed photo of Trudy and me on his desk. In front of it there's a couple of cut-out ads for villas to rent on the coast in the summer.

I walk back: I'm not getting on the tram again with the wrong money. Well I never, there's the Labour History Museum, a beautiful small building that must have been pulled down ages ago. It's still standing here in the days before some council got their claws into it.

Elections: signs with numbers on them line a long street, party 1, party 3, that was the poverty of democracy back then.

How quickly you get used to the impossible. If it wasn't that I knew where I'd come from – if I was on my way to an office block, a birthday or to one of the other unknown places that gives a passer-by a reason for being outside – I'd find nothing striking about this place.

Just before the bridge, on the left bank, is Breed's photo shop; closed down ages ago. Or would it still be there? I start out at a tentative pace. Each step is carefully considered so as to pre-empt disappointment. There it is, Breed's. My heart skips a beat; so clean, not a single mark on the sparkling polished window pane. Never thought I'd see this again.

And in the display window, leaning against a velvet drape, is someone I know. How often had I seen that man at friends of my parents, high forehead, Adam's apple vibrating when he sang. Particularly adept at avoiding children. He never said a word to me, if only Trudy could see this now.

Aunt Gré and Uncle Joop, my parents' friends, live above the photographer's, with their children Matti, Julie and Inge; that's where I hear my first gramophone record, *Don't Fence Me in*.

My father's bound to be renting a cottage on the coast, perhaps Uncle Joop's family is coming too. I've lost count of the number of times we went on holiday together. I go to the bridge and glance down the high street, there's Uncle Joop's clothes' store. He wasn't my real uncle, we just called him that, every friend or acquaintance was treated like a member of the family.

Would Slim be in her hotel by now? I look at a few coats, there's Uncle Joop, parting straight as a die, a greasy bulge either side of it. No mistaking him. He looks at me briefly, perhaps he wants to draw me inside. No, he disappears into the back of the shop.

It had crossed my mind once or twice to phone one of my mother's many friends; now I'm in touch without even trying. They don't even recognise me. I've grown

somewhat calmer after my initial fears. That's the minefield nature of chance events; I don't have it under control and the consequences are incalculable.

A large painted sign hangs above the façade of the cinema, *Joe E. Brown as the village detective*, the man's one big smiling mouth of teeth. I think about the French film *The Man Who Could Walk Through Walls* with Bourvil. He could pass through any wall. I still remember the French title, *La passe-muraille*. No fence or door too tough for Bourvil. He sticks his arm through iron and wood.

The conception of a chance event, that's where I've landed, at the blue print stage of an event.

'Sir, do you happen to know the Goedeboot Street?' asks a mother of about thirty. Her hair gathered up, sprouting a purple scarf. She's holding her little daughter by the hand.

'Yes, hang on...' Someone speaks to me at last. Is there any reason to still doubt my presence here?

'The Goedeboot Street, sir,' the child says, as if I hadn't heard the question.

'Go to the stationer's Van der Vegte, a man with a walrus moustache, turn right past the Indonesian doctor's house...'

The woman looks at me anxiously. My answer is too long-winded. Can't expect a person landing in his own memories to scrimp on detail, '...and you're there, straight ahead over a filled-in smelly ditch; it's maybe still there.'

The mother drags her child in the direction I gave. You can tell from her back that she's not completely at ease with my elaborate directions.

It's ten past three as far as I can tell from the street clock that's springing forward two minutes at a time. I pass Schnabel's printing works, not far now to Sickmann's shop where, late at night, my father would get croquettes from the vending machines. Trudy and I would get them in the morning. Heated up in a pan, the croquettes making tracks through the gravy, a frontier between two lands of plenty for me and my sister.

A man in a cream-coloured suit comes out. Shiny buffed shoes, eyebrows painted black as shoe polish, and two white whippets on a leash. I must have seen him appear here hundreds of times, materialising out of nothing.

There's a handful of passers-by in the distance, thin lines that aren't quite moving. There's the traffic island where it all began. I suddenly remember a fairground attraction, very simple given its popularity, on the bit of ground opposite the vegetable market. To get to it, I'd have to turn right.

The wooden tent was painted with stars and comets, whole solar systems give the impression that something extraordinary is going on inside, or at least something with a bit off oomph. On the façade, between all the stars and celestial bodies, was written *In and out* in fancy lettering.

A man with an eye-patch called out in a loud voice that the events unfolding inside his theatre were not to be missed. He was wearing red shoes, black knickerbockers and a blue-and-white striped top.

I paid, lifted the curtain, and went inside. Would there be an illuminated skull or a passing cart which would take me on a gruesome ride?

I'm almost at the tram stop. The attraction in the wooden tent, I can still feel the way it happened. Someone I couldn't see grabbed hold of me. It must have been a strong man because before I knew it he'd thrown me across the dark room. I felt curtains brushing past my head. It was light again and there I lay, in a pile of sand.

The woman who asked me for directions, that must be proof enough that I'm walking around here, but I've not tasted anything yet. I enter Sickman's croquette shop. The man behind the counter is wearing a spotless tunic with the company's name on the breast pocket in unfussy modernistic lettering. The kind you would find in a working-class area: not too showy.

I've still got an English coin in my wallet, a pound, maybe I can talk him into accepting it. And sure enough he does, despite not knowing what kind of coin it is. Outside, I bite into the croquette. Spicier than I would normally buy, plebeian, cheap; not slightly sickly tasting like the ones served up by my local baker.

I look at the light, in so far as that's possible when you're actually part of it. Has all the precision of a well-exposed photo. The colours on an advertising column are softer than you'd expect. There's a poster for the state school showing a boy in a beret. An advert for Klene peppermints, modest pastels rather than a riot of technicolour.

Even the clothes on the passers-by don't detract from the colour, they're serene, the grey or brown of a suit. The purple and yellow of a flowery dress that's been gathering dust in an old wardrobe.

There's a glare of light crossing the scene, the kind of strange light that falls on a photo when looked at from a different angle. It could also be down to the weather, the sun had just come out from behind a cloud.

A kiosk vendor is reading a newspaper. How do I get out of here? Bourvil would just calmly walk through a wall, whereas I was thrown right back out of the fairground tent. Have mercy on me: show me the portal to my origins, my point of departure.

Am I really as small as the photo I stepped into? There's no way of telling. How did I get in here; the transformation was too quick. It was definitely the tram stop; that's where I appeared. I can't remember exactly where it happened, all of a sudden I was absorbed into the familiar, everyday life. How do you remember if you first stepped on to the traffic island with your left or your right foot. What does it matter, you're allowed to forget.

I'm standing here open and exposed, there's still so much to happen, there's no shelter. Across the street is a row of rubbish bins, someone moves a bin, clank! clank!, a tinkling spree of zinc. I wonder when that noise will disappear from here.

I look up at the sky as though searching for a gateway to the firmament. A butcher boy in a bright white jacket cycles past with a huge basket; glancing upwards, he says, 'looks like rain, mister'.

Forget the sky; I cross the street, I need to find the spot where the photo was taken. That's the beginning.

Was my mother standing right in front of the big grocery shop with the Kodak? It must have been about there. A bit to the left, towards the “posh shop” which we called the bazaar, the kind that doesn’t exist anymore.

I have a look in the window, jewellery, eau de cologne, a Chinese man made of wood, a humming top and all sorts of other little gifts. And there it is: the parrot with the red ruby on its head. My mother must have bought it from here, or does she still need to?

I can vaguely picture the diagonal line from the camera to the tram stop. I should buy a compass and ruler for accuracy.

And how was the tram stop positioned on the table? If I knew that I’d be able to make some progress. The box with the collars was on the far right if I remember correctly, not far from the tin of wallets. Behind me the table with the glass in a holder, the dinner jacket, and the dented funnel. Blue dress with frills, odd jigsaw pieces, a green pasture beneath a blue sky.

Snapshots from anonymous passers-by, the beach scene, the celebrations and parties, there’s the huge photo of the dinner party at Aunt Gré’s and Uncle Joop’s. They’re sitting at the end of the table with Matti, Julie and Inge. At least fifteen people on either side, their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, they’ve got a fancy decorated number from a party shop. My parents, and there’s Chris, laughing merrily as always. Each face, each glass, each pinky or index finger is in focus; Breed’s best kept secret.

I’m back in the study, don’t know how, flinch backwards just in time to see the spot where I came from. There’s the tram stop, next to the box of collars I bought today. I’m never doing this again, getting all tangled up in the details of a memory.

I lay Breed’s dinner party on the table. The snapshot of the tram stop, looking at it now, it’s almost like a stage set. As if the houses, the bollard on the traffic island and the trees are all propped up from behind. It all seemed so real when I was there, the houses, the cars, like being surrounded by Mesdag’s beach panorama.

Or was I imagining it, was it all one great reminiscence with details of my invention? And the woman who asked me for directions then, the flavour of the

croquette that I can still taste in my mouth. The shop owner who took the pound without batting an eyelid.

‘Where did you just come from?’ Trudy wanted to know, having quietly entered the room.

‘Wasn’t I just sitting here?’

‘Where?’ she asks.

‘Here.’

‘No.’

I grasp the tram stop, ‘I was just walking down that street.’

Trudy takes the picture from me.

‘Off in another world, eh,’ she smiles.

‘Honestly, I was inside that picture.’

‘You’re worn-out.’

I start to sob. Trudy puts an arm around me.