

Triumph in failure

Pieter Toussaint

The Flying Bicycle



INSPIRED BY THE MYTH OF ICARUS, Pieter Toussaint has written a fascinating novel about the triumph that is sometimes contained within defeat.

Ytze, the narrator of *De vliegfiet* ('The Flying Bicycle') looks back on his youth, shared with his older brother Vincent and devoted to the miracles of technology. The inspiration for their inventions came from their grandfather who, although he died young, left behind a folder filled with blueprints for inventions that were years ahead of their time. However, the brothers were unable to distinguish between semblance and reality, and Vincent dramatically paid for this with his life when their efforts to get a flying bike off the ground failed.

At first it is as if the author is only using the Icarus myth to warn his readers that Man was not meant to fly. But Toussaint is actually more interested in another angle. He has come to the conclusion that success stories are all the same, and that it is in failure that Man is most vulnerable and most fascinating. From the moment that Ytze realizes that he is doomed to bear the burden of human impotence, he resolves to embrace it and turn it into his specialization. Toussaint has a wry sense of humour: when Ytze decides to specialize in Technical Informatics, he chooses as his supervisor a professor who has made technological failures the spearhead of all his research work. The name of the professor is Bavinck, a reference to Nescio's Bavinck, a classic personage in Dutch literature, who tried in vain to paint the sun.

Then Toussaint sends his protagonist, during his post-doctoral studies, back to the village where his grandfather was born, where he learns that those who are ahead of their time are prone to bouts of desperation. Technology, like religion, proves incapable of making Man happy or of warding off catastrophe.

The only way that a human being can counterbalance his own failures – and those of others – is by giving himself over to love. One of the most satisfying aspects of this deft novel is that in this respect, the author sees to it that his anti-hero is not left out in the cold.

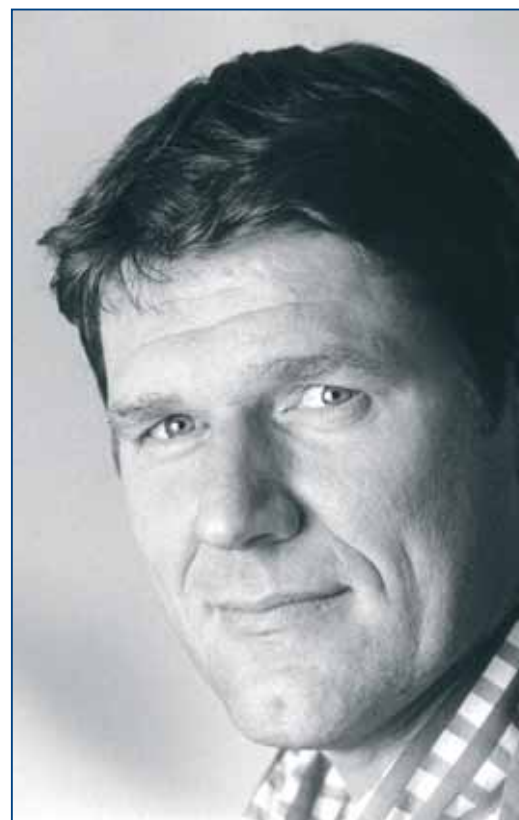


photo Bert Nienhuis

Pieter Toussaint (b. 1965) debuted in 2005 with *De brief* ('The letter'), a highly promising novel in which a Dutch couple go on a caravan vacation in Poland, in the company of their two children and a slightly loony uncle. The account is both humorous and penetrating. Toussaint deals with solidarity, friendship and love, as well as the desire to belong. Barely a year later, he has published his second novel, *De vliegfiet*, which has been favourably reviewed by a number of critics.

A beautifully written book you won't be able to put down (...) A book about complicated family relationships, guilt and loneliness.

GENERATION NOW

PUBLISHING DETAILS

De vliegfiet (2006)
192 pp

RIGHTS

Cossee
Kerkstraat 361
NL - 1017 HW Amsterdam
TEL +31 20 528 99 11
FAX +31 20 528 99 12
E-MAIL rights@cossee.com
WEBSITE www.cossee.com

 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

The Flying Bicycle

(De vliegfiets)

by Pieter Toussaint

(Amsterdam: Cossee, 2006)

Translated by Barbara Backer-Gray

p 11 – 37

We were playing soccer on the long stretch of grass in front of our parental home. I had scored twice in a row, which clearly bothered Vincent. His game became fiercer; he played more to the man than to the ball. My father called us just after Vincent had knocked me down with the ball nowhere near. He stood at the doorway from his den to the garden. He looked solemn. Vincent swore and I inspected the scrape on my knee, the grooves of which were slowly filling up with blood. My father called again, more urgently. We walked to the door, me limping slightly.

The den smelled of cigar smoke and old paper. I continue to this day to connect that smell with solemnity. I still search for it in libraries, but smoking isn't allowed anywhere anymore, except on the streets.

The smell made us solemn as soon as we entered the room. I could tell by Vincent's straightening back that he was losing his resistance. I sat down gingerly on one of the chairs that my father had moved in front of his desk. My father closed the door and walked toward us. He stopped halfway and turned to the bookcase. He stood in front of the overloaded shelves in search of something. His right hand glided along the spines. Now and then he pulled one out, only to put it right back again.

'What a lot of knowledge is stored here. And to think that it's only a fraction of everything that has been printed over time. Sometimes it's discouraging.'

He walked quickly back to his desk and sat in the old swivel chair, with his back to the door and the window that offered a view to the garden. I saw the ball in the middle of the grass.

'You two are little future engineers. I have seen that. You don't just screw around, you design what you want to make first. I like that. It shows depth, even though your pottering is still very clumsy.'

He stood up again, walked to the window and looked out at the garden. Maybe he was looking at the ball that was softly rolling away in the wind. His back curved,

like that of a cautious cat. He took a brown cigarette packet from his shirt pocket. A little later blue smoke spiralled up, sucked into the room in a long stream.

‘And now what? Are you just going to mess around and eventually drown in too many good intentions? Or is it time for education and formation?’

He laughed, choked on the smoke and coughed, finding support against the doorpost with his right hand. When he turned around his face was red and ashen at once, but he was laughing.

‘I have spent quite a bit of brain power on this, I can tell you, but I have figured it out. It is time, boys, it is time.’

He took a large portfolio from one of the bookshelves. The cover was a smoky green and black, and it was held together at the edges by black strings, tied together in a bow. My father put the portfolio carefully on the desk. He folded his glasses solemnly and placed them at the edge of the desk, the lenses facing us. I saw us sitting in the reflection, spread out wide over the convex glass. We kept quiet. Outside noises reached us: a honking car, a yell, a dog’s bark. Signs of a life that suddenly seemed remote.

He opened the portfolio and looked intently at us. Vincent started to laugh, but my father’s gaze didn’t change. I heard my mother’s footsteps above our heads. I heard her voice – she was singing – but I didn’t dare look up. I held my gaze firmly aimed at the open portfolio and the pile of bulging yellowed paper.

‘This is my bible, boys. Not a load of bullshit, but the deepest thoughts expressed in the most ingenious way ever invented by mankind.’

He held one of the papers up.

‘Expressed in lines and numbers. Words are unnecessary.’

He held up a drawing, a design of something resembling a bridge, although it could also have been a cathedral or a vehicle. The lines twisted across the yellow paper, covered here and there by miniscule numbers.

‘This is my father’s life’s work. Designs for constructions, appliances, machines that were ahead even of our time. And to think that he drew them during the first years of my life, at the end of the twenties. He was no scientist, he hadn’t even

finished elementary school, I think. None of the books in this room came from his home. Not a single book could be found in his home. He was a maintenance mechanic for the Streetcar Company of Friesland. He reconnected loose rails, laid new sections, and sometimes, as a highlight, he was allowed to tinker at one of the locomotives. And still he was capable of this, in the evening, after slaving away for a whole day like that. For that alone he deserves a monument!’

He leafed through the papers and seemed to forget us. He mumbled. Vincent sighed and I looked at my scraped knee. The blood in the grooves had congealed. Little grains lay like gems in a row.

‘I want this to become your bible too. Forget all the books around me. If you two want to learn anything about design, this is what you need, these drawings. They are the source of all knowledge.’

He stuck his index finger in the air and looked solemnly at us. I tried to hide my fear behind a smile, but I failed. I looked sideways to Vincent, hoping he would take it all lightly and pull a funny face. But Vincent was staring at the ground, his face tight, pale even. He may have been even more afraid than I was.

‘We will have the following agreement. You will have access to the bible, which I will put there,’ – he indicated an empty shelf – ‘and which you can look at whenever you want. But I demand that each drawing is put neatly back in its place after studying it. So don’t take anything to the garage or your rooms. If anything is missing or damaged from this portfolio, you had better stay out of my sight. I’m just warning you.’

His finger went back down and he closed the portfolio in one move.

‘Okay, go ahead and play soccer.’

2

In the following weeks the bible gradually became the central focus of our existence. We talked about it, first in unfinished sentences and hints, later frankly. As often as we could, we went to the den and looked at the contents of the portfolio.

‘It’s clear that you are just screwing around with those drawings.’

Vincent was using my father’s words. We studied the scribbles. Exegesis would be a better description. Every line, every number was considered a truth that we had to uncover. I copied the lines, scribbled in the numbers, and took the copies to my room to recalculate everything. I calculated until it all fit. It had to fit, and finally I managed. Often the design that I came up with during my calculations didn’t resemble my grandfather’s curly drawings, but still, they were the source, the origin of the idea.

The bible consisted mainly of impossibilities. A bridge spanning the North Sea, reaching in a high arch from the Dutch to the English coast – we built a model of it that stood in my bedroom for years. Or a series of six skyscrapers (seventy-two stories high), with every five stories a sturdy net stretched in between, on which was created a garden, a small forest and a pond. The earth lifted up to heaven. We made it from cardboard, chicken wire and sticky mud. The design incorporated several mirrors that mimicked the sun shining on the hanging gardens. We took a vanity mirror from my mother, took the glass from its patina frame and smashed it to pieces. We attached these small pieces of mirrored glass to the corners of each of the hanging gardens. When I turned on the three desk lamps in the dark garage, the effect was ghostly. The shimmering hanging lakes, the shiny mud in the light coming from the four corners, and the small figures and sticks we had pressed into the mud and that grew to five times their size in the light. I loved it. I lay gazing at this miniature world until I disappeared into it. Only when Vincent turned on the flickering fluorescent lights did I return to reality.

The underwater chamber was a special design in the portfolio. I was familiar with Jules Verne and accused my grandfather of plagiarism, but his intentions were

actually more modest. Muddy ditches and puddles, that is what he wanted to experience. Vincent and I had read a children's book that had a similar recipe for the exterior wall as my grandfather had. No steel or concrete, but a mixture of clay and sticky components.

We found a zinc wash tub in the attic of a friend's farm, and we were allowed to take it. This became our test tube. With the solemnity of a chemist we put the ingredients in the tub. Most of it was daily stuff, except for one addition. Vincent had managed to get it via a friend, whose father was a chemistry teacher. The mixture was purple and grainy. When we threw it in the tub, the contents began to boil as if a fire had been lit under it. The brew changed colour and suddenly started to solidify. We scooped it out and spread it against the form that we had covered in chicken wire. It solidified before we were even finished, making a rough, spiky surface. Vincent shouted with joy.

He let himself drop into the hole that we had left in the pumpkin-shaped roof. I attached the roof with a large wing to the rest of the construction. A rubber ring had to prevent water from seeping in. The windows were two round holes covered in sturdy Plexiglas.

The launching took place in the ditch in front of our house. It was a gray day and I was the audience. Vincent broke a beer bottle against the exterior of the underwater chamber, which lay on the pier. The yellow, foamy liquid dripped down the purple exterior, making dark spots in the tropical hardwood of the pier. When Vincent was sitting in the contraption and stuck his thumb up behind the blurry Plexiglas window, I pushed the thing into the ditch as planned. It landed on the water and tipped a bit. I saw Vincent's surprised and frightened face behind the Plexiglas, but before I knew it, the underwater chamber lay on its belly again and started to sink slowly due to the sandbags we had attached to the bottom. He pressed his lips against the Plexiglas right before he disappeared in the water.

The surface of the water closed with a light ripple. It was as if the underwater chamber had been absorbed by the liquid body that stretched between the two dikes. Silence. A seagull screamed, a fish jumped up and the neighbour's dog started

barking. Vincent had drowned in the gray sky reflected in the rippling water. I sat on the pier and stared a bit at the gray lapping water, waiting for the thing to resurface. Suddenly Vincent emerged, spluttering, without the underwater chamber. I only saw his wet head and his right hand holding a fresh water oyster as if it were a treasure.

The underwater chamber is still there, swaying, I imagine, on the undertow, covered by clams that crawl across the spiky skin, and behind the Plexiglas is Vincent's laughing face. Forever.

After this project we kept a low profile for a while. Thank God my father hadn't noticed anything. But it seemed that Vincent had lost his joy in our tinkering. It was dangerous, and he had tasted that danger.

Whenever I asked him to go with me to the den, he shrugged his shoulders, mumbled something, and continued doing what he was doing. Usually that wasn't much. He roamed around the house, lay on his bed or sat on the terrace with his school friends. The ease with which he interacted with everybody, and the persistence with which others tried to get near him surprised me. Sometimes there were ten or fifteen of his friends in our home, or outside, with Vincent at the centre of attention. I even recognized classmates of mine who never even looked at me, let alone wanted to come home with me. Only after they discovered that Vincent was my brother did they greet me and start awkward little conversations.

Their presence never fascinated me. While Vincent seemed to make his boredom bearable by sharing it with others, I let it prosper in the solitude of my bedroom. With the music from a record by Leonard Cohen in the background, I tried to read an English translation of a book by a Russian meteorologist. The author hid the wind, the rain, the cold and the soft warmth of a summer's day very cleverly behind cryptic formulas and incomprehensible English, at least for me. Every evening I read five pages, completely convinced that this would make me a better person, just as others run or do a hundred push-ups.

I had lost Vincent. This became clear to me when I walked into his room one evening to find one of my old drawings. I thought Vincent was out and I was lost in thought, as they say, when I entered his dump of a room. The table under his window was covered in papers and other junk. The floor was also littered with all sorts of stuff. A table lamp, lying in the corner on the floor, gave off a faint light and that is why it took me a while to see that there were two bodies on the bed. In fact, I didn't really see them until one of the bodies rose partly and covered its chest with a sheet. Vincent swore. He pulled the upright body back down, against his own. He was sixteen. The girl had taken her blouse off. I was too bewildered to react to his swearing and her laughing. I tried to get to his desk, wading through junk. That's where the papers should be that I was looking for. Several times I came across a stack of paper, a box full of unrecognizable objects, a pile of clothes, no doubt dirty and fruitlessly waiting to be laundered, since my mother refused to enter Vincent's room. I turned around, looking for a place to put my feet, in the meantime realizing more and more how shameful the situation was. Finally Vincent jumped out of bed – thank God he was still wearing his jeans – and threw me out of his room with a few well-aimed kicks.

The meteorologist consoled me. I had a weather station in my room, consisting of three round meters: a barometer, a hygrometer and a thermometer. I had placed a rain meter outside of my window in the ground that I could read from my room with binoculars. I had also screwed a thermometer against the window tracks, so I could measure the outdoor temperature. The pièce de resistance of my weather laboratory, as I called it, was a self-made anemometer. I had tied a long metal bar to the antenna on the roof. At the top end I had connected a small windmill that I had made using a small steel pipe and a few coffee spoons. My mother had to go to Blokker four times, muttering about the mysterious disappearance of those damned spoons. A long wire ran from the windmill along the roof to my bedroom. There, right on my desk, lay a revolution counter that I had bought for five guilders at the local wrecker. It was a large, round thing with a chrome edge, a shiny glass window and a big white arrow that crawled up if the windmill on the roof started turning. I

converted the number of revolutions to wind speed Beaufort via a complicated formula that I had partly derived from the meteorology book. After a few recalculations – I determined a wind speed of 13 on a sunny spring day with a mild breeze – my figures coincided with the weather forecast in the newspaper.

When the thing worked I wanted to show it to Vincent. He was not interested.

The evening that he had kicked me out of his room, I was bent over my daily weather forecast and determined with satisfaction that my calculations were correct. Later I understood that the data available to me at the time didn't allow for an accurate forecast, and that the success was pure coincidence, but at that moment I believed my insight was complete. It softened the pain. I controlled the world; as a fortune-teller I would read tomorrow's truth on the shiny object on my desk. That was quite a difference from lying in bed with some chick. Sooner or later he would come to his senses. Sooner or later.

My father had noticed our estrangement. After he had found me alone in his den a few times, with the bible open before me, he began to make hints. I appreciated his subtlety. It was never about Vincent or me. It was always about friendship, growing up and more such generalities. It allowed me to play dumb. I nodded and hummed, leafing in the papers in front of me, and then I left without answering a single one of his implied questions.

After my anemometer I didn't make anything else. I read and calculated, but I never went to the garage anymore.

Vincent was held back in tenth grade. He didn't have pass grades for any of the six subjects. My father turned over the report card and exclaimed that they had written all the numbers wrong, but although both the 2 and the 4 did somewhat resemble a 7, they remained the numerical rejection that they were. The result was that the next year Vincent was in my class.

We walked to our classroom together on the first school day. We had English with Schutte, a short man with a thick moustache who would have a relationship with a girl in the senior class that year, which would get him fired. Vincent walked

in front, pushed the swinging doors open forcefully, and looked disinterestedly at the red doors with the classroom numbers indicated in white. He waved at two former classmates who stood in a doorway and walked into the classroom across the hall. I recognized my classmates from the year before. Vincent walked straight to the back benches, without paying attention to anybody, sat down at one of the tables, and put his bag on another. No fellow student was welcome next to him.

That's how it was for the first couple of weeks. He was the observer in the back of the class who only approached me during recess if I had to tell them at home that he would get back late, if at all – we are going to be doing homework till late – and who mainly hung out with his former classmates, a few of whom had already left school and sometimes showed up in the schoolyard. When I conveyed the messages my mother would shake her head and my father would swear under his breath. Vincent was sixteen and he didn't feel that he was accountable to anyone.

After about three weeks there was a school party. I drank my first beer and tasted even more bitterness in being alone among so many who were clearly enjoying themselves. My parents had encouraged me to go, reasoning that Vincent was going too. As if that made it safe, as if it offered protection. Vincent walked in around eleven. He made his way to the dance floor with a girl I didn't know. His way of dancing required a lot of space, which others made by stepping back. He waved his arms and kicked his legs. The girl laughed and so did some boys who had arrived with him and who handed round a bottle of booze to each other. Pretty soon Vincent was fighting with a boy from the senior class. A few teachers came running to try to separate them. Vincent and the girl and his friends disappeared again.

It didn't interest me anymore. The math and physics classes that year opened a new world for me. The differential and integral calculus offered me a handle on the changes and brought me closer to the full life. Time had never entered into my calculations, and as a result it had remained an unreal concept, mainly meant to coordinate human pottering a little. It was merely the clock, demanding that the day be divided into pieces, representing fear and hope through unrelenting numbers, and rushing us. Only when I could put time in perspective, did it become important.

I went to my father's den again to leaf through the bible. It included designs for vehicles, sometimes driven by muscle power, sometimes motorized. I tried to envision their realization with the aid of power, acceleration and speed. My father sat in a chair in front of the bookshelves, leafing through one of his books, and smoking one cigarette after another. Sometimes he clicked his tongue in admiration, sometimes he sighed disapprovingly.

He never mentioned Vincent.

That year we had a school trip to London. I packed my bag nervously the Sunday of our departure. My mother threw a few things on my bed, silently, and I put them in the cylinder-shaped travel bag. Vincent had made her leave his room when she had come to help. Loud music came from his room. My mother's eyes were red. I examined the anemometer on my desk at length, but the arrow hardly moved because there was no wind. Outside it was freezing a few degrees. I heard my mother close the closet and leave the room. I sat down on my bed, next to the half-filled bag, and debated which book to bring. I would have liked to bring my math book, but the possibility of my fellow students catching me with it prevented me. I eventually chose the meteorology book. As thick as a fist and heavy, it filled the remaining space in my bag. I barely managed to zip it up.

Suddenly Vincent stood in my room.

'Well, smartass, do you still have room in your cabin trunk? My bag is full and these have got to come.'

He threw two black cowboy boots with sharp toes and two pairs of jeans on my bed. I shook my head, nodding to my bag that was bursting at the seams. He unzipped it and took the book out.

'Jesus, you're not taking this with you, you idiot. This is going to be a party week, you know!'

He threw the book on my desk, missing my anemometer by a hair, and started cramming his stuff into the bag. He managed to zip it.

‘Well, thanks. And keep in mind that it’s going to be a fun week. Remember that, professor.’

The students were put up by host families. We met our temporary parents and siblings in the auditorium of a school in north London. It was a large, old building, and the broken glass in the front door and the flaking paint on the walls gave the impression that it was no longer in use. Only the smell betrayed the presence of people. A lot of people. It was not a specific smell – sweat, urine, or perfume – but the indefinable smell of bodies that you miss immediately when you enter a deserted house.

The man who had greeted us at the station led us through a long hallway, flanked by two of the eight teachers who had come along.

The auditorium was at the end of the hall, closed off by two high swinging doors. When our guide opened these and we pushed through behind him, there was some hesitant applause. Before we knew it, a group of girls dressed in school uniforms was singing for us. I glanced sideways at Vincent, who was standing next to a boy with whom he had drunk quite a few beers on the night boat. His face was ashen, his forehead and nose shiny. He looked straight ahead like the others. When the singing was over, we clapped, with more dedication than the English, but that was probably from relief.

It was an exchange program. A class from the English school had left for the Netherlands and was being welcomed at our school at the same time. They would stay with some of our parents – not mine; they hadn’t signed up – as we were staying with theirs.

Schutte called our names one by one, and we stepped forward in groups of two, and were introduced to our host parents. Vincent and I were called together. Schutte introduced us to a short man with a very thin moustache on his upper lip, and a woman who was a head taller and at least twice as wide, and to a girl of about ten who introduced herself with a limp hand as Heather. Vincent introduced himself as Vince and adopted a strong American accent. I tried to spell my name – Ytze – but

did this so incomprehensibly that the short man eventually slapped me on the back as if he wanted to knock all the sounds out of my chest.

That afternoon we drove to the Fairfield's home in a station wagon. Heather sat between us and chattered non-stop in an English that we didn't understand. Sometimes her mother turned around and addressed her. The man, who had introduced himself as Richard, limited himself to looking back at us in the rear view mirror and sticking up his thumb.

There were three more daughters living in the Fairfield home. Daisy was nineteen and looked at us with her mother's expression, we exchanged two short sentences and then she went back to her room. She had long straight hair and the skin on her face was covered in jagged scars, as if her skin had been drawn so taught that it had torn in different places. 'A witch', Vincent said under his breath as he shook her hand and gave her a friendly smile.

The second daughter was pointed out to us in a photo, shown with an astonished smile, squeezed between her sisters. She had left for The Netherlands and was now at one of our classmates' home. She looked a lot like her oldest sister in the photo.

The third daughter, Buttercup, was a different case. She had shiny blond hair that waved over her shoulders, dimples in her cheeks when she laughed, and a smooth skin that shone slightly in the late afternoon light. It was clear. In Vincent's expression and in Buttercup's. Her eyes that scanned me and then returned quickly to his pale face. Her hand that touched mine only to quickly hold his.

'Cute little thing,' was Vincent's comment when we were unpacking our bags in our bedroom a little later.

We explored London, the streets where traffic was turned around, where you were almost run over a hundred times a day by a car approaching you from the wrong side of the street.

At regular intervals we had to return to the school building with the broken glass and flaky walls to hold conversations, do role-playing or other things meant to

increase our knowledge of the English language. Half the time Vincent was absent. I knew he was meeting Buttercup in the city, but I said he wasn't feeling well.

In the evening we had dinner with the Fairfields. Vincent was squeezed in between Daisy and Buttercup, talking up a storm, and even seeming to impress the eldest of the two. I sat on the opposite side of the table, next to little Heather. She chattered like the first day, but I had learned to understand her. Her tiny sing-song voice no longer prevented recognition. It kept me busy. The parents, at both ends of the table, as is proper, ate silently. Vincent paid no attention to me.

His bed was often empty until late at night. I struggled my way through an English book about the Big Bang that I had found in an unbelievably big book store – ten stories high. By the time I had dozed off three or four times already over the sour-smelling pages, Vincent came in with a cheerful expression, a broad grin on his face, and humming a tune that he had learned. It was about buttercups.

The Friday morning of that week – I had just woken up – Vincent threw a leaflet on my bed. I read 'Science Museum', saw a few photos (a steam engine and a supersonic airplane) and understood his message. We missed the final afternoon and the same singing girls from the welcome party. During lunch – consisting of white bread with cheese that tasted like rubber, wrapped in wax paper – we hurried down the high-ceilinged hallway, past the flaking paint and opened the door with the broken window panes. We inhaled our freedom and Vincent whacked my shoulder.

We took the underground. Secret movement. Hidden among people of all sizes, we zipped through the city, out of Schutte's reach, out of reach of the other teachers and Richard Fairfield. When we emerged above ground, the city seemed changed. The streets were broader, the buildings taller, the voices less important. We followed signs. Vincent took my shoulder and pushed me ahead.

I've had happy dreams about the Science Museum. Quite different from the dreams about Vincent. We walk in; the high-ceilinged spaces are crammed with technological products. Products of the superfluous, as Ortega y Gasset says, real

art, therefore. Between the exhibited treasures – in my dreams, that is – I see the designs from the bible come alive. Wet dreams, actually, but not in the banal sense that is generally implied.

With every story our excitement rose as well. It was as if we had returned to the woods of Drenthe, building huts. Vincent's impatience outdid mine. He ran from display case to display case. On the tallest story hung airplanes, like caged birds exhibiting their skill in ominous immobility. We were full of admiration and we knew it.

We knew it.

3

Oh, I was happy. We had come back, in the full sense. At home, at school, at my anemometer and at each other. We were tinkering again! After the underwater chamber we were finally working on something new.

The evening of our return home we had gone to the den. My father wasn't home, thank God; he would have kicked Vincent out had he found us there, I'm sure of it. I took the bible without thinking, a force of habit, and smiled at Vincent while I untied the worn strings. I lay the open portfolio on the desk. I didn't need to leaf through the yellowed papers that were beginning to crumble at the edges. I slid my index finger somewhere between the pages in the stack. When I took away the top half and laid it on the open cover, I saw that what I was looking for had become visible.

It was an object, sure enough, but different from the rest, more realistic, more frivolous almost. In the centre of the sheet was an overview drawing of a man sitting on a bicycle, laughing broadly. His hands were on the handlebars and his legs were spread out. It reminded me of an advertisement poster. The cyclist had considerable speed, which was indicated by his flying scarf, by a few extra lines, and by the concentric circles drawn just behind the baggage rack. The bicycle had wings, like a plane. Maybe that explained the look of fear in the cyclist's eyes that couldn't even be hidden by his martial moustache. It was the only drawing in the bible that had colour. The scarf was a purplish red, the cyclist's tight suit was yellow, and blue had been applied below the bicycle. He was flying.

Parts of the bicycle were circled and these circles were connected to detail drawings. That's where the design became like the others, abstract, executed in thick black lines with tiny numbers or cryptic instructions.

At the top of the page, neatly centred, was written in curly letters 'The Flying Bicycle.'

My hands shook when I held the page up. Vincent bent over and looked at the drawing. This is what I had been staring at every evening for the past months while

my father sat behind me, smoking his cigarettes and mumbling. This design was the only one that was achievable in the entire portfolio. The rest was science fiction, even the underwater chamber, as we had found out. But we could make the flying bicycle, in the garage, with things we could get our hands on.

Vincent took the drawing from me and studied it under the light of the ceiling lamp. He laughed, at the idiot on the bicycle probably, who was obviously shitting his pants. He looked and looked. It seemed to take forever before he nodded excitedly and exclaimed: ‘We’re going to do this one.’

As on command I closed the portfolio, tied the strings, and placed the thing back in its place on the shelves. I looked over the desk and again at the portfolio that was half hidden on the shelves in the semidarkness. I looked at Vincent, who held the drawing in his hand. My father would never notice that we had broken his commandment.

Vincent was the director. His experience in the underwater chamber had made him careful. He didn’t even want my father to find out about our new project, so the garage was out of the question as a workplace. Late one afternoon that spring he took me to an empty grain silo at the edge of the village. My anemometer had determined there was no wind to speak of, and the grey light that had hung among the houses all day had begun to mix with the dark of the approaching night. Street lanterns were only on in the few streets where action of any importance could be expected. The road to the silo was not included.

The silo was a tall building, especially compared to the rest of the village. Even the church, more like a large residence with a small tower in the centre of the roof, was no more than half as tall. The silo had a flat roof and had, judging by the windows, five stories. It stood with the front along the canal that cut the village in half. A concrete dam wall marked the place where ships used to dock to load and unload. The cobblestones on the wharf were covered in weeds, at least what was left of them after many had been taken to create garden paths and patios. The back of

the building looked out over meadows that stretched to the city fifteen kilometre away. We took the unpaved road to the wharf.

Vincent knew an entrance. One of the planks used to board up the windows on the side had broken off. You could step into the building this way, bent over. The smell hadn't changed. Years ago I had been there often. A friend's father worked there and we would go by regularly on Wednesday afternoons. The space had been full of men walking around, bags of flour stacked high, and fine yellow dust that hung in the entering sun light.

When Vincent and I entered the space was dark. The weak light that fell through the hole had already lost its power before it got very far. My brother flicked on a lighter. The flame enlarged his mobility and threw it around the space in the game of light and dark. There was junk here and there. A pile of burlap sacks, planks, empty boxes, and old bicycle. Vincent walked to a corner of the building. He seemed sure of himself, as if he, too, had been here before. In the corner a part of the space was partitioned off by a long and a short wall which reached to somewhere halfway to the ceiling. The long wall had a window – which reflected the flame of Vincent's lighter – the short wall had a door.

Vincent swore because he burned his thumb on the flickering flame. The light was gone and I heard how he opened a door. When we had shuffled in, he flicked on his lighter again. I saw a bicycle, long planks, two rolls of paper or wall paper and a lot of ironware.

'This will be our workshop, maestro. I have already collected some junk. Not a soul ever comes here, and I even have a key to this room.'

In his other hand he held a key.

A little later we walked back through the dark space. Further on I saw the vague twilight coming through the hole. Vincent stopped halfway and turned on his lighter again. The light was reflected against a steep wooden staircase that led to the story above.

'And see here, this is how you get to our launching platform.'

I laughed, like I always laugh, as a reflex, while the words that I am supposed to be laughing about don't actually register. Not until later, lying on my bed, do I remember the staircase again. I had been on it before. When my friend's father was looking the other way, we had climbed up. Up that one staircase that Vincent had shown, and then the next one, and then another, and another, until we had reached the last wooden floor, and we climbed the staircase that led to a hatch in the roof.

That one time that we had gone through the hatch outside – I had shuffled no further than three feet from the hatchway – I looked out over the roofs and the familiar streets filled with little people whom I should recognize, and over the meadows, and I felt that I had stepped off the world.

My first job was analyzing my grandfather's drawing, deciphering the scratches along the lines, separating the main idea from the details, getting rid of aesthetic froufrou. Heavenly. I sat in my room every spare moment I had, with Bachman-Turner Overdrive on the record player over and over again, a record that I had got from Vincent – he was bored with it – and I calculated and drew. I was happy. Life is ruthless; you always experience your finest hour as if it is merely the beginning.

After a week or two I had worked out a design that included thirty pages of text, as well as some twenty drawings, overview and detail drawings. When I delivered the lot to Vincent, he was scornful. He laughed, snorting, insulting. He threw my papers on his desk, which was still a mess.

'God damn, you've made a complete study of it. I don't know if you realize it, but I already started. The bitch is almost ready to fly.'

He was exaggerating. He had waited for my calculated opinion and the waiting had taken too long. The fear that I had seen in his eyes when I pulled him out of the water after his underwater adventure had never completely left. He would never make the flying bicycle without my mathematical support.

We did a few experiments on the wharf. After Vincent had constructed a wonderful propeller, we built a test structure which would allow us to measure the

propulsion created by peddling the bicycle. I had found a tension spring somewhere, with a display showing the power of Newton. When you pulled the spring, it hooked to a little cart with the propeller attached underneath it. The cart could move along for a short length along the remains of the narrow-gauge rails anchored in the wharf. Vincent used a V-belt from an old car to get the propeller going. The experiments confirmed my calculations, even taking the friction of the rusty rails into account.

We built it in the space that had once been an office. Vincent had removed the wooden board in front of the big window in the exterior wall. A lot of light and a wide view of the long meadows came through the hole. After our work the board could be put back in front of the window with four ingenious little clamps.

That is where I saw Vincent realize my thoughts. Because that is how I saw it: my thoughts, not my grandfather's. He had merely been my inspiration. The diameter of the cogs, the rotation speed of the peddles and the way in which it was transferred to the axle to which the propeller was attached, the thickness and length of this axle – all of this I had determined by myself, deriving it infallibly from the general laws of physics and the specific conditions relevant to our flying bicycle.

I still have the crown jewel of the flying bicycle. It's a shiny metal bar with a wooden knob. A gear shift, but not one used to switch speeds, but to switch worlds. This stick, made and polished by Vincent, was attached to the crossbar of the bicycle, and its purpose was to switch the peddle rotation from the hind wheel to the propeller. Thus you could switch from cycling to flying with a simple move of the gear shift.

I had had to rack my brains about this part. On my grandfather's blueprint this had been drawn and described with a stroke of the pen. Details were wisely omitted. The problem was that switching had to take place at high speed, which meant that great pressure was placed on the gear mechanism. Designers of cars and other vehicles have their solutions to this problem. Piece of cake. But for a beginner, for an amateur like me, it was a great mystery. The natural tendency, when faced with such a problem, is to take steps that are too big. In my first design I assumed that the switch from cycling to the propeller would take place when cycling at full speed. So

the propeller had to go from a revolution of zero straight to the maximum. In reality the rotation power had to be subdued by the cogs and bars, which thus became a victim of the sluggishness of the propeller. We found out the hard way, ending up with a snapping drive shaft and tearing cogs. And Vincent fell to the ground, swearing, because the flying bicycle suddenly stopped dead.

Sluggishness is not a vice, it is essential to everything that takes up space.

My invention was the hybrid drive, which meant that I could gradually transfer the rotation speed from the peddles to both the hind wheel and the propeller. So the propeller was test-running, as it were, while the hind wheel was the driving force. Once it came up to speed, the propeller was the only thing still turning. Unnoticed, stealthily, the thing moved from the earthly to the ethereal. To do this, the gear shift had to be used four times.

The final design, the shifting in four phases, had been inimitably put together by Vincent. My heart leapt when I saw the flying bicycle standing in the evening light that fell through the large rectangular window. The wings and the propeller stood next to it; they were made to detach easily for transportation. The wings consisted of a wooden skeleton covered in sailcloth that Vincent had stolen from a boat storage place. He had cleverly managed to stretch the cloth taught across the wooden skeleton using needle and thread and stays. He had painted our initials on the underside of the wings in thick black letters, mine on the left and his on the right.

That evening we did the last test. Not far from the silo there was a narrow road leading to an empty farmhouse. Almost nobody ever drove along the convex asphalt with its various dangerously deep potholes. Especially toward the evening it was a safe test location. Vincent attached the wings and the propeller to the bicycle. When he was done, he got on. Two thick metal bars with the small wheels at the end supported the bicycle and helped to maintain its balance. I didn't have to push or pull much.

He started to peddle. The hind wheel, above the ground, began to turn. A small windlass was attached to the handlebars. Around it was wound steel wire that was connected to the small side wheels. By turning the windlass he could make the side

wheels come up. That was his idea; it was not in my design. This way he could go straight for a while longer once the hind wheel touched the asphalt, supported by the side wheels.

I saw him leave. I wanted to say something, but the cold evening air dried up my voice and a hoarse, wordless mumbling was all I could utter. He gained speed slowly, first a little wobbly, from one side of the road to the other, each time with a wing that wanted to pull him down. Then straighter, more horizontal. I watched the propeller slowly get up to speed. He peddled and shifted, the hind wheel turned and drove, and the propeller was warming up. I ran after him, but he went faster. I seemed to fall behind rapidly, but I was still close enough to see how the propeller was turning faster and faster, and how Vincent switched to the final gear, the position in which the propeller was the only thing driven by the rotating peddles. His speed dropped a little, but he kept moving forward.

That was the moment I lost my breath and dropped by the side of the road. I closed my eyes and saw explosions, light flashes, lightning and such in the darkness of my introspective gaze. My heart seemed to want to tear itself out of my chest; it was banging against my rib cage. It hurt, but I was happy, just as happy as Vincent, who stopped next to me a little later with the flying bicycle, lowering the side wheels and getting down shouting. He threw himself on me, kissed me, pulled me from the wet grass, and we danced like crazy across the convex, pockmarked asphalt.

‘I took off. I swear I took off!’

He kept shouting it, and I believed him. In hindsight it seems improbable that he had come loose from the ground even for a moment that evening, but at the time I believed him completely. Of course he had taken off. After all, it was a flying bicycle.