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*The Fellow Traveller*  
(A True Story)

– inaugural address delivered at the acceptance of the post of professor to the Africa  
Chair of the Faculty of Arts and the Humanities of the University of Utrecht  
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A writer is someone who spends years patiently  
trying to discover the second being inside him...  
(Orhan Pamuk)

Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,

Ik breng u een waar verhaal uit eigen ervaring, en wel omdat het beter dan welke historische of theoretische bezinning ook licht zal werpen op hoe ik de inhoud van mijn leeropdracht hier versta, namelijk: “De positie van de romanschrijver in post-apartheid Zuid-Afrika.” Ik noem mijn verhaal “The Fellow Traveller.”

It all began on my journey here, as I was checking in at Cape Town airport. Dusk was falling, the enamelled twilight just visible from within the neon-lit glass cage of the departure hall. I was shuffling forward in the queue, my laptop swinging heavily from my shoulder. I thought about the hell I’d been through trying to write the speech that I am giving here today. Writer’s block in the check-in queue – the block may give way, I thought, once I’ve been flushed through the loops like a snail in a hosepipe.

Still thinking about blocked hosepipes, I noticed, in front of me, an old lady with a walking stick and a fluorescent pink golf cap. She was fussing with her documents, rummaging in her bag, holding us all up, as she stepped back from the counter, giving the next person in line precedence, once, twice, all, seemingly, to gain time. She was peering through a pair of bifocals attached to a cord round her

neck. Had she lost her ticket? Airport hobgoblin, I thought, a stormy petrel, every flight had one, and it must be given a wide berth. O ye gods, protect me, so that my soul gives off no light; keep me soundless and unseen, I prayed.<sup>1</sup>

I wanted to ponder in peace the assumptions implicit in the Dutch title of my inaugural address. This was not something that would resolve itself easily, 30 000 m up in the air, amid the gasps and farts and snorts and sneezes of fellow travellers. I thought again, rather sadly, about *The Bodyguard*, the novel I'd been working on when I started doing research for my *oratie*. It had been traumatic abandoning it in April – it was hot and flowing then – and I was excited. Shuffling forward in the queue, I was thinking how for nine months I had been reading and writing, trying to define the position of the writer, and still there was no finished piece that would submit to my authority – only 162 pages of notes and thoughts, quotes, questions, statistics, consoling passages that I had highlighted in pink, all on the pleasure of the text.<sup>2</sup>

How was I, an Afrikaans author who'd written just two novels, to give an overview in forty-five minutes on "The Position of the Novelist in Post-Apartheid South Africa"? And yet, if I did not want to speak for the others, there was at least my own place, my own position to clarify.<sup>3</sup> How was I going to wear the academic hood with its swinging golden tassel if I could not make a clean breast of it?

I was so preoccupied with all this, ladies and gentlemen, that I only noticed at the very last minute that the old bird in the pink cap had now worked herself back up the queue to a place right in front of me, flaunting her stick, dragging behind

<sup>1</sup> "Beschermt mij, dat mijn schim geen licht verthoont. / Bewaar mij ongezien en ongehoord" (Nijhoff 1934: 49-65). The poem "Awater" by Marthinus Nijhoff functions as an intertext in this story.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) informs the intertextual and self-referential play in this story.

<sup>3</sup> The problem of the 'position' or the essential/typical/necessary task/role of the South African writer, whether he/she is pre- anti- pro- or post-apartheid, has been at the centre of South African literary debate for some time. The vast diversities, if not incommensurates, of class, race and language, and the uneven development of the various literatures under the colonial and apartheid governments, make it almost impossible to speak of 'the South African writer.' One of the more idealistic characterisations of this situation is that provided by Stephen Gray. "The [South African – MvN] writer is always forced into a position of having to negotiate between extremes, into crossing the language-colour barrier; he or she can only be a syncretist and hybridiser. And therefore the basic act of writing is one of carrying information across one or another socio-economic barrier, literally of 'trading'... I propose, thus, a new identikit portrait: the writer exists at any of several boundaries (not at the centre of one self-enclosed group); his or her act of making literature is part of transferring data across that boundary, from one audience to another – an act which in its broadest sense may be termed 'translation.' Cf. Stephen Gray, quoted by Leon De Kock in "South Africa in the Global Imaginary: An Introduction" (2001), p. 263-298.

her on a trolley a huge shapeless carry-all, its bulk barely containable on the grid, its many straps and buckles hooking onto the luggage of the other passengers.

An ex-actress? I wondered. She had the airs, she had the cheekbones, and she was wearing a classic blue outfit, a blue silk jacket and sturdy white shoes – travelling shoes – that incongruously made her look like Daisy Duck.<sup>4</sup> The shiny rosy cap seemed to have come from another universe. It took a while before I figured out that the purr surrounding her was produced by a hearing aid. I watched as she fiddled with it, angling her head this way then that, as if trying to locate a signal from outer space. It was a bird, though, that she'd located – a sparrow, I noticed, fluttering high up among the steel beams and shiny wires of the ceiling. She pointed with her stick, then slowly lowered it – this was not a place where a trapped bird would matter to anyone, its fate was not one that could be dealt with practically in such a wilderness. She let her hand drop heavily to her side; 'tock' went her stick on the floor.

Was it this that made me hitch up my computer bag and step forward to help manoeuvre the floppy suitcase onto the check-in scale? Or her majestic auguring gesture towards the ill-fated sparrow? Helping out was not something I would normally do. Fellow travellers, I believe, should be left well alone. But here I was, stepping forward deftly – right in the middle of a long sentence about the elusive act of writing that I'd been formulating in my head.<sup>5</sup>

Can I help you? I asked as I helped lever the bag off the trolley. It was surprisingly light and soft. Together we leaned over its hump, working it into the weighing niche. The fluorescent pink cap, I now saw, was covered in glitter and stitched with sequins.

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<sup>4</sup> "She wears her blue costume and silk jacket, her lady novelist's uniform, and the white shoes [. . .] which somehow make her look like Daisy Duck" (Coetzee 2003: 4). *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) by J. M. Coetzee is used as an intertext throughout "The Fellow Traveller" which is meant, among other things, as a playful little homage to this South African author in whose compass all South African writers, literary theorists and critics should, to my mind, consciously move, and orientate themselves. In this book Coetzee investigates in his clear and probing style, the problems of writing and being a writer, with reference to Africa and South Africa also. He does so in the context of questioning the field of the 'humanities' and of what it means to be truly human.

<sup>5</sup> Underpinning the story "The Fellow Traveller" is an argument against the essentialising of the act of writing, and the reduction of the elusiveness of the act of writing, viz. the elusiveness of the subjectivity of the writer. This argument is largely based on the essay "Literature and the Right to Death" by Maurice Blanchot in *The Work of Fire* (Blanchot 1995 [1949]: 300-344). An insightful gloss of Blanchot's arguments can be found in "Om niets te zeggen van De nieuwe kleren van de Keiser" in the essay collection by Patricia de Martelaere *Een verlangen naar ontroostbaarheid* (1996), pp.12-28.

Her Majesty The Duck in a circus hat, I thought, She was thin, fairly frail, but straight-backed, and her hair was completely white under the cap. She was anxiously settling and moulding the bag onto the scale.

So kind of you, she said, giving the bag a last prod with her stick, they're my pillows that I don't travel without these days, my sleepless pillows ...

She was speaking too loudly, her accent was not British – Australian perhaps?

She pointed again in a royal gesture with the stick – and now I noticed a slight quiver in the hand that held it – but this time she was pointing at an oddly shaped leather portmanteau on the floor, a bag that might have contained a banjo in another life, or even a guitar.

Female clown with guitar, I thought. Pink hat and blue guitar, playing things just as they are.<sup>6</sup>

My books and papers I carry in this, Lady Daisy said, they will absorb unwanted resonances in the hull.

With that she turned to the counter, regally, to have her papers processed and her pillows tagged and packed off on the conveyor belt.

Plucked strings and duck down, I thought, an attitude from hell and an accent to match. Australian. Who can she be? And what about her smell? A heady whiff I caught, not old woman's flesh, not cold cream, something odd, and heavy, like an old-fashioned fly trap, or the intoxicating chalices of the cup of gold vine in my childhood.

Ladies and gentlemen, why did I at this point suddenly think of the thief who stole the character of Don Quixote? The impostor who improvised stories for the errant Knight, to the great distress of the author.<sup>7</sup> Have you heard that story? What do you make of it? I know what I think. Write and be written, I would say to Cervantes, you asked for it. And this old witch rising from the depths? Only a fool would ask her to foxtrot, I thought, but it might be fun to watch.

I looked at Regal Rosy as she picked her way through the milling crowds of the departure hall, ghosted by the transparent angles and reflecting surfaces of the airport interior, holding on to her portmanteau, tocking her way with her stick, carefully choosing her white-shoed steps, her glowing peaked cap a buoy in the tumult. Why was I feeling fascinated by her? No, not fascinated, I decided, I was in fact put off by such attention-seeking antics in public. In public,

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<sup>6</sup> "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (Stevens 1955: 165-184).

<sup>7</sup> The reference here is to the second volume of *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* written in 1614 by Alonso Fernandez de Avellaneda (Cervantes 2004: 451-940), and obliquely also to Borges's story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (Borges 1964: 36-44).

one should behave oneself. *I would behave myself at my publiekslezing*, and give my topic a thoroughly academic treatment, sneezing three times during the course of it to keep the audience awake. I was certainly not intending to stage a dramatic confession of my writerly beliefs.

Then, tricked by the god of travellers, my boarding pass was held back at the security checkpoint and my laptop impounded for closer inspection. Computers could be bombs, I was told. An official accompanied me through a service door and led me along a dimly lit corridor to an office stacked to the ceiling with shelves containing what appeared to be confiscated electronic equipment.

The woman behind the desk looked at me blankly. Not a bomb defuser, I thought. Township kwaito crackled from a transistor on the desk – a rap song. Coincidences of my twin-faced soul, coincidences take a short cut to the goal, I thought I heard the singer mumble.

Activate it, said the woman with the braided hair, pointing to my laptop, and open the last document you worked on. She and the male official observed me closely as I did so.

I should never have spoken to a total stranger in the check-in queue, I thought. Look what it had led to. Within ten minutes, I was facing a tribunal. What if *they* asked me what my *position* was – what I believed in as a writer? What was I going to say? That I believe in the little tobacco snake which, when you touch it, scrolls up its secrets in a tight coil, and only uncoils when you whistle it a hymn?

I was given a form to fill out. A bright green sticker carrying a security code was stuck onto the underside of my laptop.

Short procedure, I thought. Acquitted. A bit of local colour, my data still secure. The transistor crackled. Kafka's muzak, I thought, this was *The Trial*, the South African bureaucratic version of it. Interior decoration.

I needed a drink after this, as you may well imagine, ladies and gentlemen, so I seated myself at an empty table next to the window in the bar section of the transit area. The sound of the jet engines was faintly audible through the din in the bar. Planes ascended and descended as though invisible giant actors were manipulating them with soft dark gloves in a beam of light across a stage. I could see British Airways, Lufthansa, Air France, Air India, the red leaf of Canada, the blue star of Israel. I caught myself thinking of all the human lives held and carried by these bizarre mechanical birds. People coming and going, arriving and departing, sadness, excitement, fear.

I ordered a glass of wine, opened my laptop, read my quotes from the statement of the ANC at the Human Rights Commission Hearings on Racism in the Media.

April 2000. The document referred at length to the novel *Disgrace*, co-opting it in support of ANC doctrine, constructing Coetzee as a party propagandist.<sup>8</sup>

No wonder the man emigrated to Australia, I thought. This was something I would have to explain in my lecture. Why my country's governments – whether white or black – could not distinguish between literary truth and political 'truths,' why novels were invariably read as position statements.<sup>9</sup>

It was then, ladies and gentlemen, that someone asked, May I join you? and eased a portmanteau onto one of the empty chairs at the table where I was sitting.

Do I need to tell you who this was?

If you must, I said to Dame Duck, and shot a cold glare across the top of my laptop screen.

Excuse me, she said, I am deaf – though it does have its advantages.

Point taken, I thought.

Do have a seat, I said, watching from the corner of my eye as she leaned her walking stick against the side of the table. She nodded. This was a working table, right? From her bag – I noticed that it contained a number of slim volumes – she took out a Moleskine notebook and a pencil stub that she held poised in her trembling right hand. I considered my options. I could move to another table. I could pack up and find a seat at the boarding gate. I could give the old fool a rhyming earful. Old Mother Duck in a check-in queue, got her fellow passenger all in a stew.

Ladies and gentlemen, I'll skip the rest of her overtures, otherwise we'll be stuck in the bar all afternoon. The important thing was that the old coot was pretty

<sup>8</sup> "J. M. Coetzee makes the point that five years after our liberation, white South African society continues to believe in a particular stereotype of the African which defines the latter as: Immoral and amoral; savage; violent, disrespectful of private property, incapable of refinement through education; and driven by hereditary dark satanic impulses" (ANC 2000: 2, point 20).

<sup>9</sup> However much one can and must attribute this take on *Disgrace* to a lack of sophisticated reading skills amongst party hacks, there is also what Deleuze and Guattari would describe as the calculated attempts at domestication and reterritorialisation of complex and subversive literary material within the realm of dominant ideological discourse. Apart from this example of an overtly reductive appropriation of a complex text by the ANC, one must also, in the case of South African literatures, bear in mind the qualities of what Deleuze and Guattari call "minor literatures." Of these qualities, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy is perhaps most notable in the private and public critical responses to works of literature in South Africa. They quote from Kafka's diaries in support of this: "What in great literature goes on down below, constituting a not indispensable cellar of the structure, here takes place in the full light of day, what is there a matter of passing interest for a few, here absorbs everyone no less than as a matter of life and death" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975]: 17-18).

resourceful in getting my attention. Dropping names and witty one-liners. Again and again I felt her scanning my face. What did she want from me? And what did I want from her? Twice I allowed her to peep at the screen of my laptop. We were circling each other, chatting lightly about travelling, she had seen too many continents of late, she said, she was tired of the hassle, of stupid people baiting her for her opinions. I wondered about the opinions that were so sought-after. How old could she be? Seventy-five? Eighty?

Talking of hassle, I said, I had a scrape with the authorities when I came through the security checkpoint. They took my laptop, I told her they checked it out, opened the speech that I have to give in three days – my precious unfinished bloody inaugural speech – they poked, they scrolled, they probed, asked questions about the political references...

Why was I telling her this? This is not true! I thought then, it's not fair to the officials either. Why do you want to exaggerate? I asked myself, why do you need to entertain her? Entertaining Mrs Daisy?

A speech about literature, I blundered on, about the writer, the writing business. I think they were offended, there were some quotes about racism. Airport officials, you know, not very... sophisticated.

Then, ladies and gentlemen, my fellow-in-transit cleared her throat, squared her shoulders a little, pushed back her chair, something almost camp creeping into her attitude.

Was she mocking me? Had she noticed that I was exaggerating? For I was not being myself, dear listeners, I was being seduced into making things up. It often got me into trouble.

Then it came, her opening volley, the hearing aid hummed – but none of you would guess whom she quoted: *er is een grote norse neger in mij neergedaald / die van binnen dingen doet die niemand ziet*<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> "Er is een grote norse neger" from *Val voor vliegengod* (1959), included in *Verzamelde gedichten* (Lucebert 1974: 309). During the course of our exchange, I wrote down the full translation. Elizabeth felt that the last two lines needed more work.

a tall and surly negro has descended into me  
and in my bosom does weird things that nobody can see  
certainly not me as it is dark in there and black  
but I know for sure he studies there  
the nature and construction of my white supremacy  
first he rattles cupboards gone crumbly with mould  
next I feel splinters puncturing my shoulder  
now he scans old documents this is the stickiest bit  
I had deducted far too many slaves from tax

If am being seduced, I thought, then it is with my own tricks. She was commenting on my representation of the black officials descending on me. But what more was she plotting?

Do you recognise it? she asked, then added in an off-hand way, By the way, I'm Liz.

Yes, I said, but I was thinking, no. No Liz, Liza, Elsie, Betty whoever you happen to be, I don't want to introduce myself to you. Yes, I said, it is Lucebert, the fifties poet, how does it go on? *ik weet zeker hij bestudeert er / aard en structuur van mijn blanke almacht*. We shared a smile, quite a complicitous smile, I felt.

I am too old now to write novels, she said, my last novel nearly killed me, one needs a strong back for writing. I write poetry these days, and at airports I translate Dutch poems, a suitable activity while in transit, don't you think? Works like a charm...

She paused. Quite a long pause. Now it was my turn to scan her face. This perfumed old illywhacker, this trickster, a novelist? A partner in crime? And why did she all of a sudden look so perturbed?

Works like a charm, she repeated, doing translations – it distracts me from the valley of the shadow of death...

You never know with literary people, ladies and gentlemen, they can't talk straight, however hard they might try. So they don't try, they try instead to be as crooked as possible, and hit the mark purely through luck and bluster.

I remember when I used to seclude myself in my study in the mornings to write, she said, I simply used to cut myself off. My children would sit outside my locked door, making small whining sounds. I played deaf. My son has never forgiven me.

And then, turning away from her memories, adjusting the portmanteau on the chair, she sneaked yet another a peep at the screen of my laptop.

*Ga je naar Amsterdam? Waar moet je de bloody speech geven?*

Utrecht, I said. I closed my document, shut down the computer. There had been quite enough peeping for one day. I was not giving a peep show. My inaugural was not meant to titillate anybody, and especially not mad hatters at airports.

But it was too late, she had long since spotted the title. Well, now! Dizzy Lizzy said, *De positie van de schrijver in post-apartheid Zuid-Afrika*. There's something to drink to! She held up an imaginary glass.

I refused to play along. What was there to celebrate? A dry topic and dead notes? And why would this old crone have anything enlightening to say about it? She was a fake, most certainly – a confidence trickster, what with her bag of props.

It's typical, the title they've given you, she said, it's unintentional, completely neutral-sounding, but it's teeming with assumptions, as is all descriptive phraseology in this genre. All you need to do, is gently take the title apart, point out the ideological underpinnings, but without offending your hosts – remember,



they also had to deal with the South African transition, after all.<sup>11</sup> They had to let go of being fiercely and proudly and institutionally anti-apartheid. Then – after action, satisfaction – they had to savour being *post*-anti-apartheid. And now, do they want to be *pro-post*-apartheid? Do they want a *pro-post*-apartheid writer? Does anybody know what that might amount to? Or do they want a *post* pro-post-apartheid writer?

Well, well, well, I thought, can I believe what I am hearing? Liz the Whizz, the pre- pro- anti- Post Toasties specialist? Does that make me the donkey that brays amen, I wondered.

Don't confront them with all the posts pro's and anti' s, Liz said, opinion-mongering is not our job. Not even opinions about writing. We just have to do the best we can.

The best we can? I asked.

Yes, Liz said, jabbing the air with her stick: 1. puncture the stories of the powerful, 2. make dialogue of burning issues, 3. remind Plato of his pecker, 4. refer the architect to his raw material, 5. reveal to the throne his royal arsehole, 6. make the butcher nurse the old ewe, 7. water the little grey bushes. And as to the form: 1. find an end, but avoid closure, 2. usurp the sway of chronology, 3. unravel while ravelling the sleeve of the tale, 4. show the construction lines, 5. pull the wool over your eyes in order to listen, listen better to your gut, 6. choose music above meaning, 7. hunt and be hunted, *wij willen gejaagd worden, als wolven jagen / achter de taal aan de tong uit de mond / geen rust vinden in de koele toendraas / der lichamen niet in de steppen der steden.*<sup>12</sup>

Sock it to me baby! I said. Can I quote you?

<sup>11</sup> "De positie van de romanskrywer in Post-Apartheid Suid-Afrika" is a title that embodies certain values and philosophical prejudices regarding identity, subjectivity and the delineation of transitional states. What are these prejudices? That the writer can dispose of a unitary and stable identity, that a single stable and generalised abstract writerly 'position' (without specified contexts) can be established, and that accordingly there might be a homogenous community of novelists or a generic type of novelist that would take up or ought to take up this generalised abstract position. Furthermore, that the novel belongs to a finalised and stable genre, and that South Africa must be understood as a single homogenous territory defined by clear, formal boundaries. Finally, that there is a clear demarcation between the 'old' and the 'new' South Africa, and that the position of the writer in the 'new' South Africa differs markedly from an equally clearly defined position of the writer in the 'old' South Africa. Compare this to an alternative title: "Some positions of middle-aged white lesbian novelists belonging to the professional upper middle class in metropolitan areas of Southern Africa after 1994." The latter might perhaps give rise to a number of challenging portraits of the old butch as deterritorialised novelist (scared burrowing bitch) of a minor literature in violent times.

<sup>12</sup> From the poem "Gejaagd worden..." in *De taal der dieren*, included in *Gedichten*, by Hans Andreus (1959: 14).

Be my guest, Liz said, and don't bore them with the whole argument about struggle art, either.<sup>13</sup> Just give the people what they want, a limerick, or scenes from coming attractions, something from your next novel. Do you know Hans Lodeizen's poem? "La voix du peuple"?<sup>14</sup> *wij willen geamuseerd worden / goddelijk geamuseerd worden / door de nachtwind en haar elegante / geuren... / wij willen geamuseerd worden.*

I decided that, despite her airs, I liked old Liz. You may wonder, ladies and gentlemen, why I did not ask her surname. Or the titles of her books? Why she knew Dutch? Why the silly pink cap? It's simple, dear listeners: I like to be entertained by hints and possibilities. Is that not what I want from a good story? When I read one? When I write one? And here was a real-life situation offering me the very same thing!

I watched while Oracle Elsie took off her cap to adjust her hearing aid, and then pulled it on again over her skull.

Conductive sclerosis of the middle ear, she said, pointing to her ears. I am meeting my son – he is a research fellow in Leiden for a few months. I have to have an ear operation at the *Academisch Ziekenhuis* there, they will implant some gadget, left and right.

She held her fingers together to show how small it was, that miracle gadget.

Do I want to know this? I thought. What I did *not* like, ladies and gentlemen, was the confiding tone, the intimate nature of the information. Is this what I was going to have to listen to in return for all the free advice?

If Liz noticed me recoiling, it certainly did not stop her.

She went on, My son has undertaken to look after me for the first few weeks in his apartment. He's a surgeon of sorts, my son, a lancer of boils, a harelip specialist, a foot breaker, a jaw shortener, he amputates legs, tongues. God knows how he lives with it, I can only hope that he will be a loving nurse to his old mother. Then,

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<sup>13</sup> The formal and thematic emptiness of struggle art lead to the notorious South African arts debate in 1989 initiated by Albie Sachs, then a senior member of the ANC in exile. Sachs called for a liberalisation of the imagination and a more adult and complex artistic expression of the full spectrum of individual experience as opposed to the stale representations of collective experiences of political victimisation and heroic action produced by struggle artists. Sachs was in turn criticised by academics for his alleged inability to integrate into his artistic vision the theoretical contributions of post-structuralism, for his so-called dialectical materialist vision of history, and for his loyalist party political stance. Sachs's paper entitled "Preparing ourselves for Freedom" and the papers of his respondents are collected in *Spring is Rebellious* (1990) edited by Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press. Supporting criticism of the 'spectacular' modes of struggle writing came from Njabulo Ndebele in his essays "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary" and "Redefining Relevance" (Ndebele 2006: 31-72).

<sup>14</sup> "La voix du peuple," *Gedichten* (1948) (Lodeizen 1996: 137).

after I've recovered, we'll fly back to Australia together. He'll give my new ears their maiden voyage, he told me in his last letter, he'll hum to me the old lullabies that I used to put him to bed with. A good son I have, I am grateful to him. I have brought the letter with me... as well as the... note I got from him... before I left.

She paused. For a moment I thought that she wanted to show it to me, the letter, and also the note. And ladies and gentlemen, what I have come to ask myself in retrospect is whether I should have asked her to read them to me, the letter and the note. There was obviously some huge and worrying difference between the two. But what could I have done about it even if I'd known what this difference was? I had never thought of myself as a heartless person, but here I felt I should draw a line. Mothers and sons were not my speciality. So I hung back, refusing to be her confessor. And just as well, because what she said next was, I suppose, the heart of the matter.

My last book is about him, in a way, she said. I sent him the manuscript, it was all of three months ago, I'm very anxious to hear what he has to say... I have a copy with me...

She had an imploring look on her face. I avoided her eyes. Why did I not ask to see the manuscript, you surely want to know, ladies and gentlemen? Well, perhaps it was envy. Perhaps I was thinking of my own unfinished novel. But one thing I am pretty sure of, I would have had a much better story to tell you here today if I had read her novel that night at the airport. I would probably have been able to talk to you about how writers exploit those near and dear to them for the entertainment of their readers. Anyway, I failed my fellow novelist – that is what I feel today, ladies and gentlemen, and it is not a good feeling.

Liz tried to smooth over my unresponsiveness, she pointed to her cap. It's my son's idea, by the way, she said, lightening her tone, this inane headgear – I am to wear it in transit, as identification, so that if something happens to me, people will be able to remember the lady with the pink golf cap.

She flashed a smile. But now I have you, don't I? My guardian angel! You will abide with me!

I am nobody's bloody chaperone, I thought. And why would Busy Lizzie need someone to look after her? She was probably even able to *fly* a jet herself.

So your hearing will be improved... after the op? I asked, trying to hide my irritation.

Liz waggled her trembling right hand. There is a chance I might lose it entirely. It is a delicate operation, they say. But I have to look on the bright side, they also say. Won't it be wonderful to hear the frogs again? My dear son promised – in his last long letter he promised – he'll take me to the Dulgannon, to our old picnic spot on the river bank, to eavesdrop on the frogs.

At this point, ladies and gentlemen, I felt I had to say something, well, a little more heartfelt.

I'm sure it will be a success, your operation, I said, and, thank you, it really helps talking to you about my work, I never meant to burden you with my problems, I don't usually take such liberties...

Well, Liz said, rest assured, I'm not the dour old sourpuss I'm portrayed as, you know. Christ! Putt-putting up a hill in Adelaide in a motorised bath chair, imagine, but one does not always have control over these matters.<sup>15</sup> One is an offering, after all, as a writer, one is burnt at the altar. You will make your speech in Utrecht and be misunderstood, whatever you say, even if you translate it into symbolic logic. A writer trying to be herself for other people always encounters problems of representation, or worse even, of self-misrepresentation, so you might as well make a game of it, short shrift, and enjoy it, come what may.

As we gathered our things and took them all the way to the boarding tunnel, through the matt grey passageways, the stainless steel lifts, the rolling black pedestrian conveyor belts, I rehearsed my speech for Liz. She was listening very attentively, I could feel. Ladies and gentlemen, I won't now list the concerns I felt that day – you are all no doubt familiar with my issues – and doing so would simply distract from the story at this point.<sup>16</sup> The question is why I took advantage of Liz. It was as if she was a hatstand for my old hats. Was I abusing her? In the end, the verdict is up to you, dear listeners.

A woman in a uniform asked us suddenly to step aside from the procession. Spread, she said, looking the other way. We lifted our arms, spread our legs slightly. She frisked us lightly, with apparent distaste, her hands cosseted in a pair of cotton gloves. She ran a smooth black cylinder down our flanks. As she lifted the instrument over Liz's head, it started to beep.

<sup>15</sup> The character of *Elizabeth Costello* again appears in J.M. Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* (2005). Regarding the bath chair, cf. pp. 262-263.

<sup>16</sup> The list is not new in terms of writerly striving: Language that is clear on the surface but underpinned by a second systematically patterned 'sub-language,' an allegorical pulse below a realistic first level of narrative, integration as far as possible of all detail into a total design, but then, enough detail to make the integration quite challenging (there is not much fun to be had from integrating a few bland details into an allegorical scheme), connecting the personal and individual to wider but specific and detailed social contexts, refined psychological character effects, the grotesque body used for comic effects, the use of specific vernaculars or specialised vocabularies and archival material. It would seem to me that this list points to a doomed attempt to combine the two radically opposed options for the development of a minor literature as set out by Deleuze and Guattari. It is the difference they say, between Joyce and Beckett: "The former never stops operating by exhilaration and over-determination and brings about all sorts of worldwide re-territorializations. The other proceeds by dryness and sobriety, a willed poverty, pushing deterritorialization to such extremes that nothing remains but intensities" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986 [1975]: 19).

My hearing aid, Liz said, it confuses these detectors. God forbid, she mumbled, that it should bother the pilot.

She took out the hearing aid and dropped it in a side pocket of her bag. I remember taking note of where she put it and thinking a rather strange thought, ladies and gentlemen. Am I my sister's keeper? Am I her aide?

You can go, said the airport official, looking the other way.

As we stepped onto the next stretch of belt, Liz took my arm. Her hand was so slight it made me wince. Writing, she said, is the opposite of air travel, it is backtracking all the way, turn-offs, detours, a sweet haunted wandering at best, mostly hacking open a footpath in the Amazon.

As we came to the end of the last conveyor, Bountiful Beth cast another pearl of wisdom.

Whatever your objections to the essentialising of the writer's work, or the writer's position, or the writer's responsibility, you could also decide not to complicate things; all they really want to know is whether you people won't lighten up a bit after the demise of Apartheid, whether you can't now relax and give the world books that are less tortured and self-lacerating.<sup>17</sup> Look at *Disgrace* by your ex-countryman, she added, what good does it do rubbing everyone's nose in fateful symmetries of abuse and revenge? It's old hat, why not experiment with magical realism, it will bring you closer to Africa ...

But she had clearly lost interest. Her remark about magic realism was said distractedly. She was under the spell of something else. Her mouth hung open. As she leaned backwards on her stick to counter the incline of the tunnel leading to the hatch, I put my hand in the small of her back, easing her forward.

This always makes me feel as though I am being funnelled into an oil can, she said, tucked into a battery, strapped up, a pre-packed supper, an air-sucked shit bin. I can feel my own blood.

People over seventy should not fly, I thought, but said nothing. I was thinking, good riddance, soon I would be safely in my own seat.

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<sup>17</sup> Coetzee himself has commented on this situation: "South African literature is a literature in bondage [. . .] a less than fully human literature: unnaturally preoccupied with the torsions of power, unable to move from elementary relations of contestation, domination, and of subjugation, to the vast and complex human world that lies beyond them. It is exactly the kind of literature you would expect people to write from a prison. [. . .] The crudity of life in South Africa, the naked force of its appeals, not only at the physical level, but at the moral level too, its callousness and its brutalities, its hungers and its rages, its greed and its lies make it as irresistible as it is unlovable" (Coetzee 1992: 99).

Then, ladies and gentlemen, it turned out – yes, you’ve guessed it – I was booked in the seat right next to old Puss in Pink. I see you shaking your heads, and you are right, of course, this would never happen in a novel. But real life, dear listeners, is riddled with coincidences like this.

These airport people, Liz said, as I took my seat next to her, they sometimes surprise one with small mercies.

What was she talking about? Did I hear a note of pleading? Was there a sheen of sweat on her upper lip?

A vague understanding of a governing symmetry announced itself to me, we were a strange pair of twins, yoked at the neck, one fearing her aeroplane seat, the other fearing her chair in Utrecht. Was this, then, the bargain? The trade-off? Was this journey going to be a mutual reassurance exercise about sitting it out in chairs? Staving off some imagined mutual execution?

To cut a long story short, ladies and gentlemen, nothing was in fact staved off. Here I am, executing an *uninaugural* speech, and as for Liz, well, she tried to get through the valley of the shadow of death as best she could, reciting her poems, mumbling them like mantras. She was deathly pale, breathing with more and more difficulty as the cabin was prepared for take-off. When the plane gathered speed on the runway, her lips were already moving, and as the nose of the plane lifted, I was sure that I heard Lucebert again. *Onze vrede is een huid van vlammen / onze vreugde is een huis van vuur / onze aandacht is kappen op valken / een opengespalkte engel is ons inzicht.*<sup>18</sup>

What was the matter with her? Heart? Asthma? Blood pressure? I was certainly not going to ask. She floundered in wave after wave of extreme discomfort, clutching at her clothing, her chest heaving. Not once during the entire flight did she say a word to me about it all.

How will we get through this, I wondered. Hours to go before we land. When supper was served, empathy surfaced and I made up a rap song for her, to jolly her along. We’ll get through, we’ll make do, I sang, we’ll lift the foil from our chicken casserole, we’ll sip chardonnay from the lip of our perspex tumblers, *geen gedicht mag betogen wil het slagen*, we’ll say, *daarom is mijn schrijftafel kleiner dan mijn hand*<sup>19</sup>, we’ll get through, we’ll make do, we’ll slit the cellophane packets with our teeth we’ll spill the plastic cutlery over the face of the earth, our hearts will quake, we’ll choke on cheesecake, we’ll slap each other on the back, we’ll get through, we’ll make do, *we zullen spelen met de elementen, en de elementen zullen spelen met ons*

<sup>18</sup> “Onze vrede is een huid van vlammen,” *De Amsterdamse school* (1952) (Lucebert 1974: 125).

<sup>19</sup> “Het gedicht is eenzaam” from *Mooi uitzicht en andere curiositeiten 1959-1963*, included in *Verzamelde gedichten* (Lucebert 1974: 351).

*wij zullen zingen totdat wij doorschijnend zijn,*<sup>20</sup> *we'll get through, I sang, we'll make do. But it did not seem to do her any good.*

So we entered the depths of the night, unconsolated. I sat brooding, having switched off my reading light after Liz had squinted at it a few times. Now we were in the dark, not sleeping, facing the dead wall of the bulkhead. The cabin was an eerie limbo, stuffy, half-lit, with bodies sprawled in their seats. A child was crying forlornly somewhere in the back.

What metaphor could express the truth of the two of us sitting here, I wondered – two carved images sharing an armrest?

Next to me, Liz was sitting in the upright position, her chin jutted forward, her right hand was over her chest, fluttering like a broken bird. A totem with one working limb, I thought. Then I heard words from a faraway place. Had I fallen asleep for a moment?

*Ik wilde een keizer worden  
in dit leven van dwergen,  
maar ik kon de zachtheid  
van de perzik niet vergeten  
en bleef een heel jong kind.*

*Ik ook heb dagelijks de witte  
halzen van de angst gezien,  
de harde handen van het licht gevreesd.  
Ik kon de volle stilte van de vissen niet vergeten  
en werd een heel oud kind.*

*Nu heb ik mijn voorhoofd  
met droomkleur beschilderd.  
Dag in dag uit ben ik uw vreemdeling.  
Ik rook een vredespijp.*

I was quite moved by this, ladies and gentlemen.<sup>21</sup> Was poor old Liz, in the midst of her oppression, still trying to help me with my speech? – with what I should stress: the writer is the other, the child, the dreamer, a stranger also to herself, standing in for all strangeness, all ungainliness, all vulnerability lest its

<sup>20</sup> "hij speelt met de elementen / en de elementen spelen met hem / [. . .] hij danst en verdwijnt en / zingt totdat wij doorschijnend zijn," from "Dit is mogelijk," *Amulet* (1957), included in *Verzamelde gedichten* (Lucebert 1974: 255).

<sup>21</sup> "Ik rook een vredespijp" (1957) (Snoek 1969: 31).

place and right in the world be inked out by the masters, the bureaucrats, the sanitisers?

I put on my reading light. Liz was clutching the armrests as though they were the sides of a canoe going headlong down rapids, lifting her knees as though a snake was slithering under her seat.

I rang the service bell, ordered ice, wet towels, wipes, sal volatile, asked for oxygen, a lowering of the cabin temperature.

There was no doctor on board. A first-aid case was brought. Someone whispered, cabin fever. Liz pushed away the salts. I unbuttoned her jacket, took off her shoes, pulled down the zip of her skirt, slid my hand up her back, and unhooked her bra.

The intimacy of these ministrations seemed to have a sobering effect.

It's all right, she murmured, it's better, I'll be fine now.

Okay, it's okay, I said, have a sip of water. I waved away the stewards, managed to make her take a tiny mouthful of crushed ice.

Chew, I said, chew on the ice, the sound of it will soothe you.

I looked at my watch. Ten past four. Hours to go, still. It was then that I decided to use shock tactics. Open a window in her mind. Let in some fresh air.

Eliza Whoever-you-are, I said, take this paper wipe for your brow. I cannot save you, it's all in the mind, snap out of it at once, get a grip on yourself, look at me, I am going to tell you a story, a real-life story that will knock your socks off.

What I had in mind was an abridged version of my own half-written novel. Hail the novel as emergency kit!

I took her hearing aid from her bag and helped to fit it.

Fasten your seatbelt, Liz Anonymous, I said, and tune in to a tale from the thousand and one nights.

She looked at me, wide-eyed, clearly taken aback. Did I fully understand that look, ladies and gentlemen? I think not. I was too self-absorbed, by far, to see the hurt in her eyes. Why, they asked, do I have to listen to your idle fabrications when you did not want to hear the story of my life? An old woman who will stand alone on the bank of the river watching the slow, sad, soundless stream, with not a single frog cry to stay the swirl of Lethe? Is that not at least as interesting?

But aloud she said, My oh my, how can you be so hard on an old woman?

Tough love, sister, I said, take it on the chin, be a good fellow.

My tone elicited a wan grin.

Grin, I thought, grin all you like, just don't peg on me.

Had I understood that grin, ladies and gentlemen? I had not. I do now, though. The grin said, you're missing the point, dear, and what a sad, sad thing for you as a writer, but even sadder for you as a person.



And so, oblivious to my own blundering, I told her the story of *The Bodyguard*, listening in on myself for what would be revealed.

Now honourable Rector, members of the audience, I won't go into the details of *The Bodyguard*, I have already tried your patience long enough. But perhaps I'll just note that the idea for the novel came to me from a remark made during an interview I recently held with a famous South African photographer, who is an astute eyewitness to South African history. He said, Every time I go into the city these days to take pictures, I hire a man with a gun.<sup>22</sup>

You can see for yourself the potential of that sentence, ladies and gentlemen. A real South African story of guarded artists and artful guards. Domination, subjugation, envy, revenge, violence.

How does it strike you? I asked Liz after the first paragraph.

I am spellbound, she said, does it always take an old woman having a cadenza to get your juices flowing?

A trap gets me going, I thought – missing her irony completely – a decoy duck, like you, Mrs Daisy.

It's almost a crime story, you know, your *Bodyguard*, she said, it could be the best medicine for the type of longwinded writer you seem to be.

I hadn't thought of that, I'd never considered myself a writer of action thrillers, but why not?

So, I'm all ears, dear, cut to the chase, Liz said weakly.

Why don't you have a go, I said, be my guest, thicken my plot.

The guard shoots a robber, of course, Liz said. Bang! Man down! And the photographer takes photographs of him as he lies dying ...

I thought that we'd held out quite well along these lines until some time after breakfast, until the start of the descent. Schiphol's tentacles were already visible when Liz turned to me and remarked, I might be dead next week.

Well, I said, I'm glad I made your acquaintance just in time, thanks for your input, I'll dedicate *The Bodyguard* to you for all the world to see. *Für Elize*. Flight KLM 598. Plus your seat number and today's date.

This, needless to say, did not have the desired effect.

And I thought I was the world's worst hypocrite, she said softly, I dedicated my last novel to my son: For John with love. But I have betrayed him, who knows him better than I do? And what better topic? The maiming healer? The caring amputator? I have shown him taking his surgical decisions, enabling people to lead half-lives. Why has he not written back in all of three months? And the note. Please leave your hearing aid at home, it said, you won't need it here. He does not *want* to talk to me? He *wants* me deaf? Is that what you think he meant by it? What if he

<sup>22</sup> Goldblatt, David, 2006, p. 246.

says that I, his own mother, have stabbed him in the back? What if he lets me die in a strange hospital?

I could not look her in the face, ladies and gentlemen, so I looked straight ahead. Not cabin fever, I thought, not fear of flying, but fear of landing, of having to face her judge, her execution. Please God, let all of that remain a closed book to me, I prayed and again, and I did not enquire further. I stole a glance when she stopped talking. And then I looked the other way, resolutely. Was that why it felt as though she shrank from me in her seat? Was that why her lower eyelid rose up to meet the upper, like a bird's, just before it gives up the ghost?

When the landing gear came out, Liz fainted. Out like a candle. Head lolling. If things come to the worst, I thought, who would I have to report to? I did not think then that I would report first to the academy, ladies and gentlemen, as I foresaw all manner of red tape at the airport.

*De taal behoort aan de vogels*, I whispered in her ear as I clicked the buckle over her shrunken lap. *Ik ben te mens om te vliegen*.<sup>23</sup> Could she still hear me? I had no idea, but I thought this might do as a parting shot.

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Later, in the underground, speeding towards the city, I replayed those last scenes again and again, trying to figure out their significance.

\*

You see, when the plane landed, the passengers were asked to remain seated, a stretcher was rushed in, mouth-to-mouth resuscitation was given – in vain, as a pulse could not be established – then a drip was fixed. And then unfixed. The sheet was pulled up over her head, and she was wheeled out feet first. I walked alongside the stretcher all the way through the emergency passages. Her son was waiting at the door of the ambulance, next to the suitcase stuffed with pillows.

I clasped his hand briefly. I'm so sorry, I said, I brought her walking stick and her shoes, and this, holding out the wilted pink cap that I had retrieved from the overhead storage after the steward had taken out the portmanteau and propped it up on the stretcher.

Could I keep it? I asked. We had an interesting conversation, your mother and I.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wanted to tell him, your mother had wisdom, she was generous to the last, she loved you very much. But I thought better of it.

The son was curt, extremely upset. He explained briefly, a wrong diagnosis made by a doctor in Adelaide, panic disorder with agoraphobia, but there was obviously also a heart condition, it was his fault, he should not have made her take

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<sup>23</sup> "De taal behoort aan de vogels" (Kouwenaar 1956: 36).

the trip, and he was sorry about the inconvenience, could he pay for a taxi, or a hotel as a gesture of appreciation for what I had meant to his mother? He had heard from the staff that I had tended to her throughout the night. But I declined his offer as politely as I could. He did not look sincere at all. He looked like a vivisector. I took my leave, found the stairs to the underground.

When the train jolted forward and started gathering speed in the dark tunnel, something dislodged in my head. I opened my laptop, logged on to Windows.

I typed the prelude: It all began on my journey here, as I was checking in at Cape Town airport. Dusk was falling, the enamelled twilight just visible from within the neon-lit glass cage of the departure hall.

I knew that the rest would come in its own time, I was no longer in a quandary about what to say at the inaugural.

I logged off, closed the lid, strapped the laptop back into its compartment and thought: this is familiar territory, *this* is my position, one that is discovered anew in every story I write, every word renewing the silence that it breaks.

Why did I feel so confident then, in that swaying tube? I certainly do not feel it now, ladies and gentlemen, now that I understand that I'd failed the poor soul.

When I emerged from the subway into the concourse at Centraal Station in Amsterdam, a dove glided from a ledge and winged overhead, straight to the exit and onto the square beyond. I lifted my hand to my eyes to follow its flight against the shimmering backlight.

It augurs well for my stay in the Low Countries, I thought, still in that confident mood. A resident dove, a homer, it has found its way out, as a matter of course.

But have I found my way out of this tale? I am not so sure any more. This world my friends, might, in fact, not be the real one.

For, a few minutes later, as I stepped onto the tram just as the bell went, in a flash I knew who she was, this Elizabeth, this so-called Australian novelist with her Dutch poems and her pink cap.

The question is, do *you* know? And *if* you do, what will you make of it all? And whatever you make of it, will you forgive me? Even if, as I stand here before you, I cite in my defence only one hackneyed line of verse: *Lees maar, er staat niet wat er staat? Dat is wat ik wilde vragen.*

\*

### Tenslotte

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