

A Tender, Bitter Mother's Breast

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[R I A N A S C H E E P E R S]

It was 1992 when I first set foot in the Netherlands.

No, of course I didn't travel by ship like my ancestors, those two Scheepers brothers from Gelderland who left for South Africa in 1701 from the Dutch town of Enkhuizen.

No, I came by train from Frankfurt and first stepped onto Dutch soil at Amsterdam's Central Station. If it had been down to me, I'd have got there ten years earlier, as an eager, knowledge-hungry student. But unlike my slightly older compatriots, who in previous decades had fairly easily gained admission to pursue their higher education at Dutch universities, I was not so fortunate. By the time I was fit and ready to discover my 'ancestral homeland' of the Netherlands, to study, to conquer the world, the Cultural Boycott was in full swing. South Africa was the pariah of the world, and there was I: white, Afrikaner, Afrikaans. Not welcome at any Dutch university. Full stop. It made no difference that I was called Adriana Wilhelmina, named after the Dutch Queen Mother; I was a child of a pariah state, and that was that.

But by 1992 there was a lot going on in South Africa. Just then Dutch cultural and educational institutions were putting out tentative feelers and making contact once again with academics, artists, thinkers, the movers and shakers in South Africa. I was invited to attend the Language and Culture course organised every summer by the Dutch Ministry of Arts and Culture at Nijenrode Castle near Utrecht. I was the first student from South Africa to attend the course.

My first visit to the Netherlands was an intensely emotional experience. In a crazily romantic way I felt as if I was fleeing South Africa, going home, back to that maternal breast, retracing the route that my forefathers from Gelderland had followed to South Africa. There was no doubt in my mind that my ancestral homeland and its people would welcome me with open arms, would comfort and cherish me. Because my own country, the South Africa I had left behind, was ablaze with anger and violence. Boipatong, Khayelitsha and Soweto; gunfire and blood; screams in the night; defenceless bodies lying broken against the warm earth. And here was I, leaving my homeland, climbing on a plane to Frankfurt (the cheapest route) and from there by train along the tourist-swamped Rhine to Cologne, the Netherlands, Amsterdam Central. Home.

Riana Scheepers (1957-).



The lecturers on the course at Nijenrode didn't know what to make of me. None of those experienced teachers had ever heard a word of Afrikaans. They knew all about the cultural boycott; some of them could remember a snatch of the old wartime song *Sarie Marais*, but they knew absolutely nothing about me or my people. And now they were faced with me: a young white woman from Africa, who understood Dutch perfectly, knew more about Dutch literature than any other student on the course, was fluent in a language which sounded vaguely like Dutch, but no-one had a clue what it was. A Flemish dialect? A newly literate Dutch-speaker making language errors? A speech defect? Some kind of funny baby talk? No, this was Afrikaans, my melodious mother tongue. My teacher did his very best to improve my Dutch pronunciation, but eventually gave up. I was the cleverest idiot on the course.

It was in Utrecht that I met Riet de Jong-Goossens, the delightful witch who would later become my translator. Riet juggles Afrikaans and Dutch beautifully and enables Afrikaans writers to speak Dutch so wonderfully, so easily and so fluently. She also became a staunch friend, a soulmate without equal. In later years, she would travel with me around the Netherlands and Belgium to my many engagements.

The two of us laughed ourselves silly. About all the hilarious things the Dutch come out with so freely. The most terrible words, words I would never dare utter in polite company, but which they use quite shamelessly. Words like *bum*. Unbelievable. And even the c-word, which no Afrikaans-speaker would even dare think.



A poem by Riana Scheepers in a garden in Ypres.
(*And if. And if you do forget me, my Love/do it steadily/ without haste...*)

She would be hugely embarrassed. By the hilarious things *I* said so freely. A prominent Nijmegen couple invited me to their home for a meal. That strange woman from South Africa.... they wouldn't let me stop talking; they couldn't believe what they were hearing. They watched and listened in amazement. 'So', my hostess asked me, "how do you find life as a single parent in South Africa?" And that's where the difference between the two languages betrayed me. What I thought I was saying in reply was '*I get by just fine on my own*'. What I actually said was, '*I have no problem making myself come*'. I was completely baffled by the icy, shocked silence that followed my words. The visit was a disaster.

Riet couldn't believe her ears when I told her about it. '*Do you know what you said?*' Of course I didn't.

I did an interview with a radio journalist and Dirk den Hartog, a prominent lawyer, happened to be listening in. Afterwards he told me: '*I was listening to you and thinking: my God, what do we have here? Marieke van Nijmegen, back from the Middle Ages?*' He contacted the radio station and asked if he could meet me.

I accompanied a friend to her church in Diemen, where she sings in the choir. After the service we all had some coffee, and a young man there just couldn't believe his eyes when I was introduced to him. A white woman from Africa! And she really does speak a weird form of Dutch! He fell head over heels in love with me, asked me to marry him. He had an apartment with a nice little garden where I could sit on sunny days when I was feeling homesick for Africa. *'But Wim, why would I marry you? I'm older than you; I have two sons who are almost into their teens.'* But didn't I need his protection? he asked. Was I safe in Africa? *'No, Wim, I am not safe in Africa. But I would die in your apartment with its nice little garden. And its sun on sunny days'*.

One afternoon I skipped the course activities. Instead, I got on a train and set off in whatever direction it was going. I had heard no news from my turbulent homeland, but I knew from the screaming newspaper headlines that things were bad. I got off the train at some station or other and went for a walk. I found myself in a churchyard. My God, what was that I could see? A gravestone, worn by many years of Dutch weather:

Adriana Wilhelmina Schepers
1899 – 1945

I knew then that I shall return to South Africa. But what tender, bitter mother's breast is it that I am bound to? ■