

'We Playact It Because We Mean It'

The Absurd Oeuvre of Annelies Verbeke

136

[L I S E D E L A B I E]

Annelies Verbeke (b. 1976) is a parade. She is a multitude of men, women, children and cross-dressers, all of whom are called Annelies Verbeke. This is what she said on the literary talk show *Winteruur* (Canvas). She transforms all these different selves into the series of remarkable figures who populate her pages: an author wakes up as a bear; after a failed relationship, Monique Champagne becomes stubbornly determined to save fish; a highly gifted boy called Hadrianus launches into the haka whenever the mood takes him. In that same conversation with talk show host Wim Helsen, the author declared her fondness for the short story, a genre for which she is happy to fight. In the short story, all the Annelieses get to have their turn. The short story is playtime and writing is a game, but one with serious stakes. By transforming facets of herself into characters, the author investigates the possibility of an alternative and often absurd existence. This makes the short story an ideal breeding ground for cultivating a wide range of outsider figures.

Verbeke's fascination with unusual types is evident even in her debut, *Slaap!* (Sleep!, 2003). This well-received novel carries the seeds of her later work within it and links her to the young Arnon Grunberg. Black humour and irony run rampant on the pages of both authors, although Grunberg's cynicism cuts more deeply. Verbeke is more gentle to her freaks. She makes fun of the absurdity of their existence, but always applies the comforting balm of familiarity. However unusual her characters' life choices might be, their emotions are our own. Picture the lonely gym manager who takes home the massively muscled Mehmet, whose use of steroids has made him impotent:

He goes to work, obediently and expertly, and you have complete confidence that it won't take long, until his breathing disturbs you, and you see that he is crying. There's a bodybuilder with his head between your legs, sobbing away. Just your luck.



The derailment that constantly beckons

Annelies Verbeke
© Alex Salinas

In *Slaap!* the first-person narrator is Maya, a young woman with the unfortunate habit of not taking her severe insomnia seriously. She finds that at night she falls prey to an inescapable stream of thoughts, but she grants us no further insight into her mind. Maya plays down everything, including her lover's concern: 'Now he heard only my uncontrolled shaking, saw the hardness of my tears. He knew but he did not understand. Neither did I, but that was what was so funny about it.'

To dispel her restlessness, she goes for long walks at night, pushes her boyfriend away, wakes up forty-eight people and meets Benoit, who has been deeply scarred by his mother's death. He also features as a narrator, offering an emotional counterbalance to Maya's sarcasm. He does this right from his introduction, in which he talks about the imaginary whale Frederik, who would carry him to Morocco as an orphan. There is a gentle sadness simmering under his account. This balance between satire and pathos, between ruthlessness and compassion, quickly became Verbeke's trademark.

Slaap! set the tone. It is a taut, staccato debut, in which Verbeke immediately got to grips with her theme: escaping with nowhere to go, aimlessly fleeing everyday life.

Her next book, *Reus* (Giant, 2006), is also about characters who long to escape their daily life. Sisters Hannah and Kim hate the mother who abandoned them, celebrating this loathing every year on Mother's Night, and neither of



them knows quite what to do with their good husbands and beautiful houses. Just like Maya in *Slaap!*, Hannah shields her thoughts from the outside world. As a result, her actions seem extremely arbitrary. She eats Post-Its, shares a passionate kiss with her new stepmother's homosexual son, and breaks in to the house of one of her 'freaks', the people she interviews for her column in a weekly magazine.

Following Kim's breakdown, they end up in Australia, in search of another life, whatever that might be. 'The beginning of the end,' Hannah announces. There is a dark subtext in those words, which is undermined by her complete apathy:

We waited patiently. Now and then I threatened him a bit more with the plastic knife.

'Hey, Hannah,' he said finally. 'I've had so much patience with you, but now it's over. It's done. I'm sorry.'

Then we could finally leave.

In Australia, the sisters happen upon a trace of their vanished mother. Their escape develops a purpose, but the plot collapses in a concatenation of implausible twists and turns.

In her first collection of stories, *Groener gras* (Greener Grass, 2007), Verbeke is more successful at maintaining the focus. She weaves fifteen short stories around a central theme: winning and losing. With this as a starting point, she covers the entire range of human emotions: jealousy, pride, fear, joy. Her fondness for quirky characters, already seen in the freak parade in *Reus*, is now given full rein. At the same time, Verbeke moves away from a first-person narrator. She creates more distance and allows more room for alienation and gentle mockery, in which sympathy still resonates:

[The young man] yelled a few insults, of which 'bald dwarf' hit Etienne hardest. Feeling rattled, he continued his walk through the night. When he got home, he kicked a cardboard box to pieces. He regretted it immediately. The box had been particularly suitable for waste paper. Now he would have to find a new one.

It is striking that these characters seem to move through life with just a little more direction. The eccentrics in *Groener gras* are saddled with a mission or have a goal in mind. The peculiarity of this mission or goal often plunges them into complete isolation: Steven wants to use his perfected skipping on the moon, Lola projects her affections onto an ox and kidnaps the animal, while Elsie founds her own state, Solemprium.

What unites them with Maya from *Slaap!* and the sisters from *Reus* is their fear of 'just any old life'. Verbeke's characters yearn for a compelling life and for escape routes, even when no escape is necessary. They burn bridges, go in search of something, without knowing what. They want to win. They create victims. Freedom beckons. But so does derailment.

We all live in fictions

With her accurate portraits, Verbeke makes these derailments believable. She focusses on abnormalities, capturing them with a fine brush, enlarging the image. Her characters, too, are excellent observers and are constantly interpreting, registering and reducing. They draw conclusions and make the complexities of reality more manageable. The sisters in *Reus*, for example, easily find proof of love in their shaky marriages: 'They loved us. You could see that. They did the vacuuming and bought salt when we'd run out.'

Her characters map out one another's weaknesses but disregard the beams in their own eyes. Hannah explicitly points out that they are not made for introspection:

I realised that I no longer had a grip on myself, but it was not the right moment to go into that more deeply. It was actually never the right moment to go into it more deeply. Life was all about avoiding the moment to go into it more deeply until your very last breath.

Although they confirm their loneliness, they do not dare to delve into it. They hide behind a shield and make themselves unapproachable. The ways in which people avoid their pain is what Verbeke investigates in the novel *Vissen reddden* (Saving Fish, 2009). For ex-writer Monique Champagne, her own salvation



involves saving fish. After a breakup, she fires off fanatical pleas against over-fishing. Her calling takes her to international congresses, where she serves as an emotional interlude between the academic lectures.

Monique Champagne, frequently referred to by both first and last name, bombards us with facts about species of fish, while refusing to confront her own sadness. It remains buried, revealing itself only in details:

She turned on her laptop, ran back downstairs and unloaded the dishwasher. Most of the crockery was not originally hers, but it was now, it was now.

At the congresses, she makes friends with the aspiring writer Oskar Wanker and with Michaela, who mistakes her for her childhood friend Stefanie. While other characters by Verbeke move heaven and earth to begin a new life, Monique has a new life land in her lap. She plays the role of Stefanie with aplomb, but becomes more and more entangled in a web of lies. After a further rejection, this time from the fishing industry, the pain finally hits her with full force and the floodgates burst. In the central chapter, the sadness rolls at Monique Champagne in waves of memory; she is inundated by a host of separate paragraphs of no more than five or six lines. Every wave is an observation, which Verbeke captures in a new, poetic style.

Finally he turns around between the sheets that she has soaked with her sweat. 'Look at me with those eyes,' she whispers urgently. When he stares at her, she trembles, shakes her head. Those are not the eyes she meant.

The bursting of the floodgates brings redemption, rebirth. Monique is a prophet; her goal assumes a religious dimension. Before long, other people's lack of understanding creates a new isolation, which Monique once again is unable to break through. So, for the length of the entire novel, she remains stuck in roles she has made up herself. She uses Stefanie's fake pain to suppress her own emotions. 'The child died,' Monique/Stefanie tells Michaela, before throwing herself into her arms, weeping. 'The comfort is real, she thought. The comfort is real.'

The communication skills of practically all Verbeke's characters actually leave a lot to be desired. In *Reus*, Kim falls into a stubborn silence for forty pages, while in the short-story collection *Veronderstellingen* (*Assumptions*, 2012), poor communication is elevated to a theme. Fifteen narrators remain stuck within their own frame of reference, do not express their assumptions and avoid confrontation. Or as one of the characters puts it:

She once heard a guest on a talk show say that you should never ask about what you do not want to know. It was a casual remark, and maybe the guest had never attached much importance to it, but since then Samba has allowed that advice to silence her several times a day.

Rather than adjusting their own assumptions, the characters continue to live in their own fictions. Alex, for instance, is convinced that the author Dominique Favarque is feigning memory loss in order to be left in peace. This assumption is completely undermined by the story 'Feest' (Party), which is told from



Dominique's point of view. That happens throughout this collection: Verbeke has the various narrators wander into one another's stories. By doing so, she grants the reader a view into an alternative reality, one that often remains hidden to the characters themselves. 'We all live in fictions,' one of the characters in the collection *Halleluja* (2017) was later to confirm.

A typical element of Verbeke's work is that much is left unspoken between the characters. Only the novel *Dertig dagen* (*Thirty Days*, 2015) breaks this pattern to a certain extent: communication proves possible, but mainly between strangers. Clearly, a listener is needed who is far removed from the characters' own world and who suspends judgement. The sounding board in question is the Brussels-Senegalese Alphonse Badji, who works as an odd-job man in the Westhoek and receives an intimate glimpse of 'interiors'. While he hangs wallpaper and sands floors, the residents inundate him with their worries and fears. This is in contrast to his partner, Kat, whose fear of abandonment is so extreme that she fabricates a relapse of her cancer.

When current events intrude

Thirty Days is, in a number of ways, an odd-one-out in Verbeke's oeuvre. For the first time, we encounter a *happy* character who does not give way to the pressure of an alternative life. Alphonse is not tempted by derailment. In fact, he is the saviour who tries to prevent others from going off the rails. Alphonse is the man who takes Duran to the hospital with his chopped-off finger, who carries the ghost of a dead brother from the house of one of his customers, who sticks a newspaper article to the wall of his music room about Chen Si, the Chinese man who prevented 278 suicides all on his own. He is a Messiah figure and plays this role with bravura right to the end.

In addition, *Thirty Days* is a novel in which the outside world can no longer be denied and seriously damages Alphonse's happiness. Until that point, Verbeke's social criticism consisted largely of exposing the disease of a generation: an inability to settle in a normal existence. In *Slaap!* the outside world is completely absent. The setting matters little to people who are as focussed on themselves as Maya. *Groener gras* appears to indicate the first sign of change.

The opening story 'Naar de toekomst, waarin een reis gewonnen wordt' (To the Future, in which a Journey Is Won) is about war refugees dying in the back of a truck from a lack of oxygen. Elsewhere in the collection, the pressure to win, to be visible, becomes so great that Stefaan needs a shotgun to do it. 'Stefaan is lord and mas-ter,' he screams, as he shoots people down. 'Stefaan is doing this because he can,' the narrator confirms. Then, in *Assumptions*, we meet the xenophobic Didier Van Ranst, who leaves piles of money all over the house in an attempt to catch his household help stealing. In spite of that handful of standalone stories with a socially critical approach, current events only truly entered the foreground of Verbeke's work in *Thirty Days*. The social issues that Verbeke raises in that novel are inextricably entwined with her main character and the setting in the Westhoek: latent racism, the refugee situation, the stubborn isolation of villagers in a region where death reigns supreme.

At the same time, it is the villagers who are the connection between *Thirty Days* and Verbeke's previous work. With the exception of Alphonse, the characters fit seamlessly among the people in her short stories. Take Duran, who runs a pita shop and, in his spare time, makes ice sculptures in his own image. Minor figures like this illustrate Alphonse's goodwill and prompt questions about the moral issues around the boundary between concern and interference. Their endless comings and goings disturb the rhythm of the book, however, which constantly shifts between a novel and a collection of stories.

Back to the beginning and the end

Her latest creation, the collection of short stories *Halleluja* (2017), is the most typical Verbeke and the highlight of her writing career so far. It is as if all the familiar ingredients have culminated in this collection: black humour, a sense of self-perspective, and eccentrics who are longing for a clean slate. This time the stories are held together by beginning and end, a thematic line that shines throughout her entire oeuvre. Every escape, in spite of its lack of direction, contains the promise of a new start.

In *Halleluja*, Verbeke takes her absurdism one step further. In order to provide an answer to the absurdity of existence, she explores the boundary of magic realism. Stylistically, she chooses to employ the metaphor. In the central story, 'De beer' (The Bear), it takes this form:

The author has become a bear. An old, brown bear. Of the male gender, but impotent, as he believes he discovers when carefully exploring with his bent paw.

The author-bear, Verbeke's alter ego, is lying in bed beside his partner, who seems, just like everyone else, not to notice the metamorphosis. The only one who sees the change is a friendly gravedigger with 'a sixth sense for these things'. He tells the bear that you can begin something and end something. Sometimes, behind refusal, freedom beckons, the bear concludes before going to sleep. On waking, 'she is no longer a bear. And no longer an author either.'

'De beer' is a story about intense exhaustion. At the heart of the collection, Verbeke presents her alter ego as one of the characters who want to explore a different life. She refuses to play her role as author anymore. The stories

before and after 'De beer' are an attempt to provide an answer to that central story. It is followed immediately by the disconcerting 'Bus 88', in which someone wakes up in another person's life and tries to make the best of it. This symmetry is the formal principle that lends structure to the collection. While the first story presents an omniscient wailing baby, the final one is about an elderly woman who wants people to love her. All of the stories pivot around the axis of 'De beer'.

In *Halleluja*, Verbeke demonstrates that she is an author who can continue to explore the same themes while finding innovation in form. In *Vissen redder* she goes in search of a poetic voice, in *Assumptions* she makes connections between all the stories, in *Halleluja* she applies a mirror structure. In this last collection, Verbeke adds a stream of header text in small capitals above the story 'Lente' (Spring), which can be seen as her credo and poetics:

WE LIKE BEING WHERE WE ARE. WE CANNOT DO WITHOUT OUR PARTNERS. WE WOULD GO CRAZY WITHOUT THIS BODY, THESE DAYS AND NIGHTS. UNDERSTANDING AND AFFECTION, EVERYTHING THAT IS PRECIOUS AND FAMILIAR TO US: WE CANNOT BE WITHOUT IT. SO THAT IS NOT IT. WE BELONG WHERE WE ARE. WE WANT TO STAY THERE. WE ARE NOT ALWAYS THERE. WE GET DISTURBED. WE DISTURB OURSELVES. [...] WE WILL DRIVE TO THE HOUSES OF OUR LOVERS AND CRAWL ACROSS THEIR FLOORS, SCREAMING THAT WE CANNOT CHOOSE. WE MEAN IT. WE PLAYACT IT BECAUSE WE MEAN IT.

Verbeke's characters want security and independence. They are restless actors. They take on the roles that are assigned to them and flee when that role stifles them. Verbeke herself also playacts it because she means it. Her writing is a play, a game with all those different selves, her absurdism is a way of capturing an illogical reality. That absurdism often springs from the way Verbeke observes the world. In her gaze – involved yet distant – lies the key to her oeuvre's irresistibility. ■

www.anneliesverbeke.com

Annelies Verbeke's books are published by De Geus,
www.singeluitgeverijen.nl/de-geus.

Translated by Laura Watkinson

ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Assumptions (*Veronderstellingen*), translated by Liz Waters, published by World Editions, 2015.

Thirty Days (*Dertig dagen*), translated by Liz Waters, published by World Editions, 2016.

Two Extracts

By Annelies Verbeke

In the Bud

[...]

Mehmet and you are standing sipping apple juice among drunken people from another planet. It was your idea to go to a bar. Now and then a stranger comes and feels his biceps. He undergoes the touching passively, but something in his face makes one suspect that that will change.

'Shall we go?' you ask.

He puts his half-full glass on the bar and you follow him outside, to his car, which he scarcely fits into.

'So shall I take you home?' he asks.

'Will you stay over?' You've never asked that yourself.

'It won't work,' he says in alarm.

'Are you married?'

'No. Not anymore. But because of all the stuff I've taken' – he hits his ribcage hard – 'something's wrong.' His hands fall into his lap and start fiddling with each other's nails.

You understand.

'Just sleeping is fine too,' you say.

'OK then,' he says. 'But be careful, I can still fall in love. It happens more easily than it used to, actually.' He starts the car.

The city outside is your city, but you don't recognise it, you could be anywhere. The thin moon seems sharper than usual. Perhaps the bar wasn't your only bad plan of the evening. Perhaps the return of the monster and your desire for the man next to you do not coincide by accident. Perhaps no catharsis but a repetition will ensue.

To make matters worse, when you see his enormous body standing clumsily among the fragile things in your apartment, you are overcome by an excitement you have rarely experienced. Should a ray of sunshine come in now, a rainbow might appear between your legs. You decide simply to tell him.

'I can lick you or something,' he sighs.

On any other day your desire would have crumbled, but tonight you land on your bed with a jump and cry: 'Do it!'

He looks at the hummingbirds from close up. He puts his finger on one and says: 'Mehmet.' You are the other one. You are struck by this, but are mainly impatient because horny.

He sets to work obediently and expertly and you have every confidence that it won't take long, until his breathing disturbs you and it turns out he is crying. A

bodybuilder is lying between your legs sobbing. The things that happen to you. 'Sorry!' he says. 'I cry so easily these days. With Disney films, everything. Take my advice: don't mess around with your hormones!'

'Why are you crying *now*?' He is sitting bent forward on the edge of the bed, you've put an arm round him, you can just reach the other shoulder.

'Because I have no libidó anymore and at this moment I wish it were different.' You feel a laugh coming on which in view of the situation you try to suppress. What you do come out with sounds nasty.

'Sorry!' you say to his indignant face. 'But you said "libidó", with the stress on the last syllable.'

'What should it be then?' He sounds rather pissed off.

'Libido,' you say. 'Or libído. The last one is English, I think.'

'So you don't know yourself?'

'No.'

Meanwhile your own libido has also fled the room.

'Do you want a drink?' you ask.

'Do you have Aquarius?'

'Isostar.'

'That's fine.'

You each drink a bottle in front of the television. In the repeat of the news the newsreader discusses the new attacks. Mehmet bursts into tears again. You cry along with him. He puts a heavy arm round you, it must stay there.

'Can't be easy for you as a normal Muslim,' you say.

'It's not easy for anyone,' he says.

Fifty-three people have died.

'*Après nous le deluge*,' you say. It's an expression from a former life, it strikes you he may not understand it.

'No.' He looks at you, his arm remains, his freckles are stars, his eyes dry. 'No,' he says again. 'After the flood it's up to us.'

'In de knop' from *Halleluja*
De Geus, Amsterdam, 2017

Translated by Paul Vincent

In Hamelin

Agreed, last night has something to do with it – not that I regret it, I have to live. Baron von Münchhausen was able to arrange a fix and my problem with MDMA – I’ve often noticed – is not the substance itself, but that I can go on drinking if I’ve taken some, I have the same thing with coke, no feeling of satiety as far as alcohol is concerned. OK, up to that point it’s my responsibility, I should have left those cocktails alone, but in itself it was a great night: I kept weaving tiny dreadlocks in the baron’s arm hair, and he kissed me on my temple, mouth and shoulders, as we embraced, as we danced, and there was a walk, after which we had to run back home fast because that woman was there, that Katja, I’ve forgotten what her fairy-tale character is called, the one with the ladle, is that Frau Holle? – but anyway she wasn’t there last night, we all had time off and she was sitting as herself in a restaurant and nudging her husband and pointing outside, at us, the Baron pissed a bubble on the asphalt, you couldn’t see anything as it had rained. I could see it coming that I would sleep over with him, that wasn’t the problem, or his paunch – he asked me if he was too fat for me – I love paunches, for a long time I lay across it on my belly, while he gently stroked my buttocks, that was nice, I remember, but then the sex itself, these things happen, I simply couldn’t concentrate, I was sitting on top of him, but he seemed to be metres beneath me, after a while his head was no bigger than the head of a pin, really weird. I can’t remember when I fell asleep but I do remember that in the morning the Baron kept pointing at me the whole time – that I now had to go to work with those ro-ho-ho-ho-hound eyes, I would have enjoyed that, if he had not laughed in a mean way. But I go off to Hamelin again, where I report and that Claudia, who says that I’m no need from next week, so, without any notice, I’m not needed any more, my input, it’s over: das Ende! And she looks so bitter that I know there’s been some sort of complaint, perhaps from Frau Holle, in that case the Baron could also forget it, but I don’t call him because this morning was rotten, and I don’t ask Claudia for a reason either, I don’t ask what I’m supposed to live on, I don’t even ask ‘Und was ist mit meinem Deutsch? Ich bin doch hergekommen um Deutsch zu lernen!’ No, I have one thought and it is very circumscribed, very clear: you don’t promise a Pied Piper something you later renege on. So I’ve been fired and if I want those two weeks’ wages, I’ve got to show up until the end of the week in the same stupid suit, play the same tune on my clarinet, this is a low point, this will leave a lasting mark on me. I consider sending a message to the Baron after all because I feel a Desire welling up in me, I am overpowered by Desire, but I won’t get in touch and the Desire will turn into Longing and who knows I’ll be able to cry a bit and there’ll be something like a catharsis – I think, and I’ll keep to two glasses of white wine to ward off a hangover. Less than half an hour later I see them coming in my direction, I’m sitting playing the clarinet on my step by the town hall. You can’t hold it against a child like that, often it’s the fault of the parents, in this case certainly. The way they come strolling up to me,

family represents mood, one word, two syllables – boredom? Right! The father has shown the world how with very little cerebral activity and very little good taste you can become very rich and since that achievement all he fantasises about is screwing a Porsche, now too, in his mind, he unscrews the cap of the petrol tank, sticks his erection in and comes almost immediately. The mother looks around her disapprovingly, next year they must go to Disneyland Paris again. I can't really disagree with her, Deutsche Märchen Strasse, I'm pretty well sick of that kitsch at the moment, the language too, why did I actually want to learn it? *Hameln! Hameln! Rattenfängerstadt im Weserbergland!* Right through my headache I blow my clarinet, while every pore focusses on transmitting the telepathic message: Weitergehen! Lasst den Rattenfänger in Ruhe! Grimm-Grimm! But they don't, walk past me. They don't. They stand looking at me pityingly and the daughter is the worst of the three, I see that now, that child of nine who from hunger for attention sometimes plays a younger child, plays innocent while looking at you coldly, bloody kid, with a sharp voice asks: 'Mama, wer ist das?' And after the mother has shrugged her shoulders it is the father who answers: 'The Pied Piper'. And then that child again with her eyes latched even larger and colder onto mine: 'Aber Papa, der Rattenfänger von Hameln hat doch keinen Busen?' And they find that hilarious, the parents, both of them, the father laughs with his head thrown back, the mother tramples on the spot and hyperventilates in her hands. What a child they have produced, such a short time on this planet and already so corrupted, such a thing requires an effort, but they succeeded. Proudly the mother wants to say to her offspring that some people have to do the craziest jobs because they didn't pay attention at school, and the father wants to add that nothing like that will ever happen to his girl, but they can't manage it, I'm drowning the whole family! The whole of Hamelin! I make them clutch at their ears, the man, the woman and the child, I run on ahead of them blowing, until they realise they can't escape me, that I am leading the whole way back, past my steps, Claudia also charges out of her office, more people follow, a panicky procession whirls round and round but I am faster, I run past them till I am leading them again. Now I must lure them into a ravine or a river, a rock that closes, but spatial orientation has never been my strongest point, so I lead them to the staff toilets, to which I have the key. But then my lips contort, my mouth undermines me, my lungs slow down the blowing and here come the tears, there they are, just now, I think, not now, but at the same time I think: it's a start.

'In Hamelen' from *Halleluja*
De Geus, Amsterdam, 2017

Translated by Paul Vincent