

Night Travellers

Peter Vermeersch

Translated from the Dutch by Florian Duijsens

Most of the time you don't notice them, also not when you're leaving on another trip, even though you damn well know they're there. They too are on the move.

You take the train to the airport from Brussels-North, for instance, wander aimlessly through the corridors of tax-free, and click yourself into an airplane seat. You land in a strange city, find a taxi driver who quietly nods at you – a professional, you think – and hand your passport to a hotel receptionist who offers you a smile in exchange for a nice review on TripAdvisor. *Thank you so much, sir. Enjoy your stay.*

For them it's different. They go on foot, in groups, resting all their hopes on blankets and aid packages and the money they've saved up for months, trusting it to Western Union or hiding it in the soles of their shoes. They arrive in Mersin or Izmir and trace secret routes on cell phones, staying in shady hostels on the advice of vague intermediaries, heading out onto the water despite all the warnings – on a raft made of driftwood if necessary – and sometimes, once on land, erasing their fingerprints with the flame of a lighter. Then they get on to trains to European stations, reaching Brussels-North, for instance, and wander the long marble corridors in anticipation of the reception centre.

I travel by day, they are night travellers.

What must it be like to leave your home?

I think of Sijsele, the village outside of Bruges where I grew up. I moved out in 1990 – I was 18 and off to study in the city – but even now it doesn't feel like I completely left, even though my bed is no longer there and my bedroom has turned into

a guest room. In my thoughts, my teenage bedroom looks just like when I left it, like I could return any time. In those same thoughts I still live there. Sijsele: that's sprawling development along a road with car dealerships, warehouses, ornamental gardens, and in the background a watercolour of birch woods, pastures, and a small castle that once was home to aristocrats. I sometimes go there to look around, to check if everything's still there. There's still grass poking through the asphalt by the supermarket, I notice. In summer, a girl on a pink moped rides by the hay fields. The landscape of my youth still seems largely intact. But I know it just looks that way. All through Flanders, village life now takes place amidst new development and social mobility. SUVs are parked outside the café, 't Oud Gemeentehuis, and the shop of my old bicycle mechanic, Hendrik, is now called New Reubens Sport. This is globalisation, but at a provincial scale, and that's rather small. My eyes are used to the tangling buildings of Brussels, its bric-à-brac, its messy grandeur, and that's why the village I came from seems to grow smaller and smaller every year.

But for the past few months, 500 asylum seekers – mainly from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan – have been living right here in this slightly shrunken place. In the village that used to be my home they found shelter in an emergency relief camp. Behind them lies an odyssey that often took them across the Mediterranean, the Balkans, and Central Europe, an odyssey that is hard to recount. When did they decide to leave? What did they have to take? Which destination did they dream of? Somewhere in Syria there must be yellowing Lonely Planets, hailing from the time when you could still couchsurf through the country, visit its ruins, which you could then still associate with sunsets and summer romances. But no travel guide can tell you how to hitchhike out of a war zone. Their journey was largely invisible, along paths the normal world traveller never comes across. And now they're in Sijsele, of all places, a village that suddenly, disproportionately finds itself mentioned in newspapers and in the speeches and plans of policy makers. I think about these newcomers. The day traveller greets his nocturnal counterpart. How does a refugee experience my former home?

The emergency relief camp in Sijsele consists of a few warehouses on a fenced-in compound. The Red Cross covers the most immediate needs: medical assistance, information about asylum procedures, Dutch lessons, games for the children. You can read the refugee camp as an extension of the war, a sign of failing international leadership, but also as a beacon of civil courage. Volunteers work hard. “Shelter Sijsele” is a Facebook group coordinating several aid initiatives.

Hi everybody,

The Red Cross has worked with the inhabitants of the refugee camp in Sijsele to make two beautiful football goals (3m wide, 2m high, and 1m deep) and is now looking for nets for those goals.

Hi everybody,

For knitting and crocheting workshops in the refugee camp, Sylvie is looking for wool, as well as knitting and crocheting needles. If you have some to spare, please contact Sylvie directly.

Hi everybody,

We don't need any more corks. Thank you.

Hi everybody,

Thanks for all your reactions! By now plenty of bicycles, colouring books, strollers, and buggies have been collected.

It's a regular day. I see a boy wearing neon-yellow sneakers. He's sitting on a wall looking at the same melancholy grey sky I looked at from my room as a teenager, when my world wasn't much bigger than this village. I see bunk beds and donated toys. Along the brick wall of a warehouse is a long line of shiny white washing machines to wash the clothes in which people fled. In a refugee camp a washing machine is not just a washing machine.

I'm reminded of "Objects of War," an installation by the Lebanese artist Lamia Joreige I saw at the Tate Modern in 2011. Glass museum cases held the war objects in question: a pack of AA batteries, a bag with Miss Piggy printed on the front, a BASF cassette tape. These were the personal possessions of people from Beirut who had survived the Lebanese civil war. A cassette tape from Beirut was not just a cassette tape. Every object formed the beginning of a war story, and the people told those stories in videos playing on a monitor next to the museum cases. Oral history. I remember the feeling that overcame me, how I leaned in to see the objects more closely, hypnotised by what I found behind the glass. What stood out was this: the silence they seemed to give off. Or rather: that silence versus the turbulence these objects also seemed to give off. As if the tumult of the war had been stored within that silence.

And now I'm looking at washing machines. But the camp in Sijsele is no exhibition, no history. This is now.

The arrival of these 500 people – brought over from Brussels a few months ago – was an occasion that did not leave the village undisturbed. Damascus washed up outside the parish church of Saint Martinus, stirring up locals and media alike. The world was arriving in the village, and TV reporters had to cover it, because the village might not be ready for the world. Against my childhood background of parking lots and grassy verges they were interviewed, the villagers of my youth, residents who were worried, apprehensive, indifferent, and enthusiastic.

When I saw those images, I thought: this village and the world, perhaps it's not all that new. The irony of history is that the world has gotten stranded in Sijsele once before, though everything looked different then. For a long time, the warehouses where the refugees now sleep had served as barracks for soldiers and storage for military equipment. At the start of the 1950s, the Belgian army's 92nd logistics battalion had come to Sijsele, which hadn't left the residents undisturbed either. The military compound systematically expanded over the years and remained active until 2010; a strange presence that residents first resisted, later tolerated, and eventually ignored.

I remember the time of the soldiers well. Especially the long fence I walked along every morning as a child. The school was near the church, our house by the edge of the woods, and in between lay a park sprawling with barracks, dormitories, and officers' accommodation. On part of the compound, deer and turkeys roamed freely, while jeeps stood on the training grounds, ready in case the bomb would drop. There, with a view of the pastures, soldiers in khaki uniforms were being drilled. I also remember the large-scale war games, their intense activity, the nervousness infecting the whole camp, seeing soldiers on our street who seemed ready to fight a new Vietnam War in the very woods where my brothers and I looked for ants' nests. We skateboarded outside, my brothers and I, clearing the road when another truck of soldiers in camo drove by, twigs on their helmets.

When I was twelve, my school organised a class trip to the barracks. The school board thought that twelve-year-old boys should know about the world and gave us a taste of military service, that inevitable certainty somewhere in the uncertain darkness of our future. I remember how we entered the gate, into unknown territory, curious about that strange occupying force on our playing fields. An officer showed us the dormitories. We ate soup in an empty mess hall that smelled of cauliflower and detergent.

"How far does a machine gun shoot?" a classmate wanted to know. The officer pointed to the shop on the other side of the street ("Tamsin: Floor & Wall Tiles."). "Suppose I'd shoot you," he said, "then that same bullet would ear up all of Tamsin's!"

Perhaps that was the moment I first realised that it didn't take much to completely derail a normal situation. That everything could be going as usual one moment, only for the tiles to explode in your face the next. It was 1984. The Cold War was still on. I learned a lot about Orwell that year. In my little room I obsessively listened to "Life During Wartime" by Talking Heads. *This ain't no party. This ain't no disco. This ain't no foolin' around.*

How do you avoid becoming a night traveller?

You have to be lucky. You have to be born, that's the first thing. What's the chance that it's *you* who's born? Almost nil. And yet you exist. What luck. What's more, you need to be born in a place where you can survive. Where your first cry is not drowned out by bombings. Everyone who exists was lucky enough to have been born. Not everyone who's alive was lucky enough to have been born in a place and a time that isn't marked by violence. Your SUV could be parked in front of the event space of 't Oud Gemeentehuis, but you could just as well be sleeping in a bunk bed at the barracks.

How easily you forget.

We've never had any problems with those people.

Look, they're waving.

That raises questions for people: What if a hundred of them decide to take a walk here in Sijsele? What about our safety?

I was once like them. I arrived in 1956, from Hungary, at the time of the uprising. And I have made my home in Sijsele ever since.

It's not going well. We're doing this all wrong. Belgians are no longer Belgians.

The TV reports about Peace Project Sijsele: five refugee friends, among them a civil engineer from Baghdad and a physicist from Damascus, are going to do volunteer work. Out of gratitude. Out of sympathy. Planting flowerbeds at schools, making small repairs at the senior centre.

The TV reports about the Refugee All Stars: to battle boredom, and for the fun of it, several Iraqis have started a band, performing at the cultural centre, the Cultuurfabriek, in front of an enthusiastic audience. Their music is a mix of styles. Different traditions from the Middle East and Balingkans join together in a unique blend. They're

just starting out. There are so many musical styles along the Balkan route, the repertoire of the Refugee All Stars can only grow richer.

I have often travelled along the Balkan route in recent years. It was easy: My non-counterfeit passport is a skeleton key that, without me ever having had to do anything to deserve it, grants me access to all corridors of the European labyrinth, and far beyond. I check in, saunter over to the security checkpoint, lean back a second, get in, wait, read a book. My travels are diversions. I'm suspended in the air. Before I snooze off to the Boeing's murmurs, I hear a flight attendant say: "There are no sandwiches on this flight. We're sorry for this grave inconvenience."

Recently, over New Year's, my love and I visited Ljubljana. The city was decorated with long strings of wooden stalls selling scented candles, Chinese caps, and rabbit-fur slippers. Foggy clouds of breath hung over groups of people talking, laughing, and dancing to the most popular songs of the year. At one stall I bought a woollen hat against the cold, and we went to sleep in the room where we stayed, above a theatre which had hosted a performance for children that afternoon.

While we were sleeping there that night, about 2.000 people crossed the southern border of the country, at the Croat-Slovenian crossing in Dobova. Perhaps they'd come through Serbia first and then hit the Hungarian border fence. Without me noticing, without anyone in Ljubljana noticing, the Slovenian government brought these border-crossers on trains or buses to shelters in the north of the country, closer to Vienna, from where they would probably travel to Germany or another Schengen country, by train if they were lucky, on foot if they had to.

In Ljubljana I didn't see them. They were invisible. They were spoken of like a natural disaster. A flood without sea, a deluge without rain. I read a few stories, reports from residents along the Western Balkan route, not just its Slovenian section. Some residents, for instance, had encountered a few of these passers-through by chance. A man living on the edge of the forest directed a flashlight in the wanly lit face of a tawny Afghan. He gave him food to eat and called the police.

I found it hard to get a sense of the scale of the situation in Slovenia. In a café on Mestri trg I read a newspaper with the most recent hard data: 300,000 passers-through, though barely a hundred had registered in Slovenia. Why didn't anyone want to stay in Slovenia, one journalist wondered. In other newspapers I read reports about a new border closing and the protests against it. About the fact that the razor wire for the new barricade is made in a Hungarian prison. About the powerlessness of the Slovenian government, which just seems to be reacting to the chaos without even trying to get any insight in the situation. I heard that in October the Slovenian police had housed about a thousand refugees in the village of Paradiž. How strange must it be to arrive at the borders of Europe and end up in a village called Paradise? I read about NGOs offering food aid in Dobova. They handed out jars of chocolate spread of the old Yugoslavian brand Eurocrem. How strange must it be to be handed a jar of chocolate spread at the borders of Europe that says "Eurocrem"?

I spoke to two young Slovenian mothers. The television footage of refugees with young children wading through a wintry river trying to cross the border, they found it unbearable. They didn't really know what to think about the whole situation. What to say? That everything's changed so quickly, in less than a year's time? Last Christmas, refugees weren't an issue, they said. Last Christmas, the government wouldn't have stopped any refugees from crossing the border. It's a new problem that's not new at all, they said. They compared it to the time of the Bosnian war, or the Kosovo conflict, when refugees from those areas wanted to stay in Slovenia because it was familiar Yugoslavian ground. But the current refugees don't want to stay. And so it's not even Slovenia's problem. Right? They looked confused. No, they decided, it is Slovenia's problem after all.

It can't be called a fence, they taught me too. Not a fence, a 'technical barrier,' the Slovenian government had decided. Perhaps linguistic guideline like that are meant to disguise the underlying political tragedy. The mothers wondered. It was misty in Ljubljana, heavy snow was predicted. The snow would erase the borders, turning everything as white as a blank page. They looked out through the window and saw their

own children as war refugees in the whiteness outside. Shadows in limbo. Neither here nor there. It made them feel powerless and sad.

The mothers hadn't gone to the border to see. They only knew that at night there were trains and buses taking refugees from one side of the country to the other. They'd also heard about the people living near the border, often farming families, who endure the new policy despondently. The refugees weren't the problem, these border residents said, but the policymakers who'd decided to place a technical barrier here. For years they'd lived here, and they'd long had enough of those borders, with or without asylum seekers. First everything was Yugoslavia, so there wasn't any border; later the country fell to pieces, wars broke out, and the border grew solid. Later still they were reunited in the European Union. And now divided again. On, off, on, off. Nothing's as exhausting as an on-off relationship with the neighbouring country. Recently their cattle would sometimes get stuck in the tangle of the new barbwire. That too is Europe: dying cattle on the borders. Some border residents had pieces of land they could no longer access now, on the other side of the barbwire. There had been a protest recently. Activists had decorated the technical obstacle with Christmas baubles. A few played volleyball: one team on each side of the border. A tricky game, this: A ball that hits the nets is forever lost.

I listened to these stories and thought about them while I strolled around Ljubljana's Christmas market, an empire of mulled wine and spun sugar. On the bridge I saw a man and a woman kissing passionately, their mouths wide with uncontrollable desire. I thought about borders, divisions, and reunions. About tragedy and pleasure. I also thought about "Campo dei Fiori", not the square in Rome, but the poem by Czesław Miłosz about the Warsaw carnival in the summer of 1943, when warm winds from the burning ghetto lifted the skirts of girls on the other side of the wall.

In Ljubljana I didn't see passers-through from Syria. The only displaced people apparently were my love and I and the freezing Italian tourists looking to party on New Year's Eve.

I thought of home.

It is an irony of history that the compound in Sijsele where the Belgian army stationed itself in 1952 had previously hosted a nursery for plants and flowers: “Hof-bouwmaatschappij Flandria,” founded in 1909. On this spot, on the same grounds, and behind the same fence where refugees now have a temporary home and where soldiers used to camouflage themselves for marshy games of war, once lay fields of chrysanthemums and acacias. Greenhouses protected the flowers against the chill of the outside world. It’s an irony that confuses me, and one I’d like to somehow read something in. Can you summarise the past hundred years with this place? Perhaps like this: flowers in the interbellum, weapons during the Cold War, displaced people in the early 21st century.

Flandria, that’s my grandfather’s time. He would tell me about it as he held my hand walking to ’t Oud Gemeentehuis café, where he’d play cards with a few old friends. When he was young just about everyone in Sijsele worked at Flandria. It sounded idyllic. Now I have my doubts about the working conditions at Flandria, but as a child I firmly believed in the flower-village ideal from my grandfather’s youth. He would get his first real job there as a young man, that was the plan. But then a detour appeared in his life when he was 19. World War II was a dark, distant notion, but the occupation was real, taking my grandfather and some of his card-playing friends to places of forced labour in Germany. After the sudden death of his mother, he returned to Sijsele, a journey by train followed by 18 months of living like a fugitive under the flimsy protection of the bare West Flemish countryside: barns, fields, woods. That too was a kind of shelter.

It’s not really all that new. Back then, the world had washed up in Sijsele too.

A normal situation can derail unexpectedly. One moment all is peaceful, the next it explodes. You could have been a night traveller, like everyone at some point could be. Though now you don’t often feel like travelling is such a divine miracle. No thrilling feeling of happiness overcomes you, and no fear either. Now and then you hear about someone who freezes in fear as soon as they set foot on a plane, just like you sometimes hear of people who find the profoundest pleasure snowboarding down the most perilous

curve of the piste. But nothing's as perilous as entering the perverse force field between the policymaker and the human trafficker. Nothing's as deceitful as the thought that one day you really will be welcome somewhere. That you'll be able to exchange the house you were forced to leave for a better one. Once you've left, you'll never come home again.

How do you steady yourself mentally and physically during those kinds of detours, travelling that winding world? If you never experienced it, perhaps you can never know.

I think of Abdul Rahman Haroun, the Sudanese man who walked from Calais to the UK in the summer of 2015, 50 kilometres on foot through the Channel tunnel, the same tunnel that once symbolised the flourishing post-war collaboration between the French and the English, the same tunnel that now must be one of the most heavily guarded places in Europe. 50 kilometres of darkness, and then suddenly seeing a light. Perhaps then he briefly did believe in the post-war dream of European integration. Overwhelmed by a thrilling sense of happiness is how I imagine him. Probably followed shortly by disappointment.

I'm not travelling, now. I'm home. This is my home. I'm sitting in my room. And I don't mean my teenage world in Sijsele, but my study in Brussels. A random Sunday in winter. It's 2016. I look at melancholy grey skies, streets emptied by rain reflecting the streetlights. There are reports on the radio about tensions at the Calais camp, and about the demeaning living conditions in the other shabby areas where people have washed up nearby. Reports about getting stuck in the mud, about policy that's stuck. Charity to refugees is suspect, a politician says. He doesn't want to encourage fleeing, he says. There is speculation about the numbers still on their way. The tone of the newscaster suggests restrained dramatics. He speaks of a stream, a flood, a natural disaster. No reports about Sijsele. No reports about a possible resolution to the conflicts in the countries of origin.

I decide to listen to Talking Heads again, to "Life During Wartime". It's been a long time. The song seems to be about someone surviving on peanut butter in a New

York under attack. It's 1984. *This ain't no party. This ain't no disco. This ain't no foolin' around.*

One day we will recognise the current era as an episode in a history book, testimony from refugees in Europe will write the oral history of the early 21st century: stories of lost hopes and lost homes, of shame over failing policymakers and of the value of civil courage. Of the objects of war, the joy of escape, the tears of escape.

Later, years later.

For now there's only now.