

Letters to a tree

Stefaan van Biesen 1996 - 1997

Monologue of a plein-airist

In an epistolary novel, the letters are addressed to a fictitious person, who acts as a sounding board for the writer. In this case, the artist has chosen a tree in a park in Heusden-Zolder as the addressee. This tree has become the imaginary mirror of his thoughts. Yet it remains difficult to breach the confidentiality of the mail because the outpourings from the monologue are authentical. For the artist, the tree becomes a canal so that his own thoughts can surface and take shape in words and images. He reaches a sort of inner prospecting, a kind of esthetical prayer wherein he tries to define his place in the reality that surrounds him. During the childhood of the "tree-ful of letters", more than one hundred growth rings ago, artists really started to observe nature. They didn't want to work according to the existing templates, and they started examining the sensation of light in 'plein air'. The subjectivity that comes with looking at nature in progress led to a revolution in Art. The accidental and whimsical play of light made art acquire a sketchy character in the end. Because the emphasis lay on the impression of the environment, the own instinctive looking and the personal viewpoint were accentuated. This is the way in which Stefaan van Biesen looks at the "human aviary" in which we live. To use the words of the artist, he "tries to stand up crippled as wood can be", but with a certain amount of breathing space, somewhat away from the woods. "Just disagree with me for once", he asks the tree, but the latter chooses for a deaf camouflage, so that the question is echoed back. In the dying reverberation, you only seem to hear "il faut faire sa propre vie".

Stef van Bellingen

The strange endlessness of a second

That day, I watched you for a long time, and I wondered what your silence means to me. Maybe you do speak to me, but the sounds are lost, or I can't decipher the language you speak and only hear the rustling of the dying leaves in your crown. I will probably have to keep guessing what you are able or willing to tell me, if not being able to speak is more than just silence.

I decided to write you a letter that I will read to you one day or another, right there on your spot. It may be a mystery to most, but somehow I am convinced that my words can reach you anyway.

I will be your "one-way pen pal", who cannot expect an answer from you, but still this is something we share together.

I don't hope for a swift answer, secretly I hope for a sign.

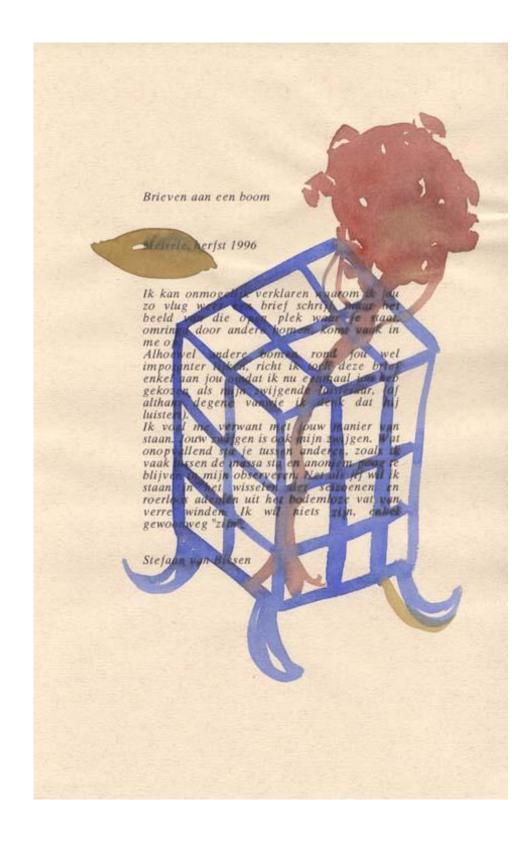


(anonymous)

I cannot possibly explain why I write to you again so soon, but the image of the open space where you stand, surrounded by other trees, often surfaces in my mind.

Even though the other trees around you may seem more imposing, I still direct this letter to you and you alone, because after all, I chose you as my silent, alleged listener, or at least the one of whom I think he is listening. I feel connected to your way of standing. Your silence is also my silence. You stand between the others, somewhat inconspicuously, just as I often stand between people, trying to observe anonymously. Like you, I want to stand in the changing of seasons and breathe motionless from the bottomless pit of faraway winds.

I won't want to be something, I just want to "be".



You, breathing in this world and I, standing before you in thought, what makes us both companions?

In a world that often dresses itself in madness and horror, you are the one remaining silent, as if your silence is a condemnation, your motionless plea to those unwilling to listen to the soft sway of your gradually balding crown. Your language is a burden weighing me down, because every sound articulates your bid, impalpable with the falling of your late summer leaf.

I'll share your company more often in my mind. You show me, (apparently without noticing my profane dependency), that there is another way of life. Your rooting in the lap of mother earth and reaching for the pulling heavens are reasons to live. That I should reach like a tree for the faraway and the intangible to keep on longing for what I have stored in myself in every move, in countless thoughts, in every particle of my being. Maybe that is what you do: standing and stretching to what makes you stand your ground, the wish for a fulfilment, a dream, a lust for life.



Soon you will go to sleep with naked arms raised to the grey heavens that span this scenery, and you and me. Then, the summer will be long gone and live only in memory, then warmth will be a cherished gem and well nigh forgotten by some. Sometimes, a memory may be too faded to recall what a day was really like then. And during our slow winter sleep we dream ourselves the days, we give account of bygone days that are piled up inside the number of the years. It makes us grow with the frugality of one ring per year, like the bark of the tree that we hope to be in times of doubt and oblivion.

I send you this letter with a drawing of how I see you in my mind. Even if a memory remains elusive in the multitude of thoughts, still there are images that lodge themselves stubbornly and ineradicably in the mind. The ever-returning ghost of days past, a ship crowded with drifters, driven by the nostalgia for the safe haven. I too am pursued by this neverceasing feeling that has been driving me to faraway places ever since my early childhood.

But you are fixed, unshakeably steady, you are going nowhere. You stare at the unbridled blue and suck the sap from the depths of the earth. My restlessness seems naive and childish compared to your impassiveness.

(I am drawing you a tree)

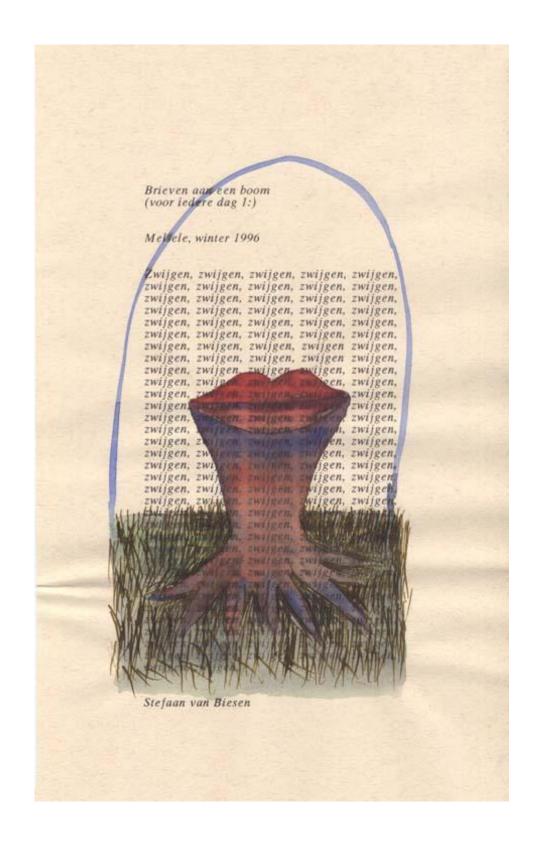
I would love to say or write you something today, but I am tired and empty as the hollow fruit that has unfastened itself from your branch, waiting for a hand to seize it.

This is the circle that closes on itself, the snake hungrily biting its own tail.

I lavishly scatter the words, hoping someday to reap what lies enclosed within me, the things waiting to bud.

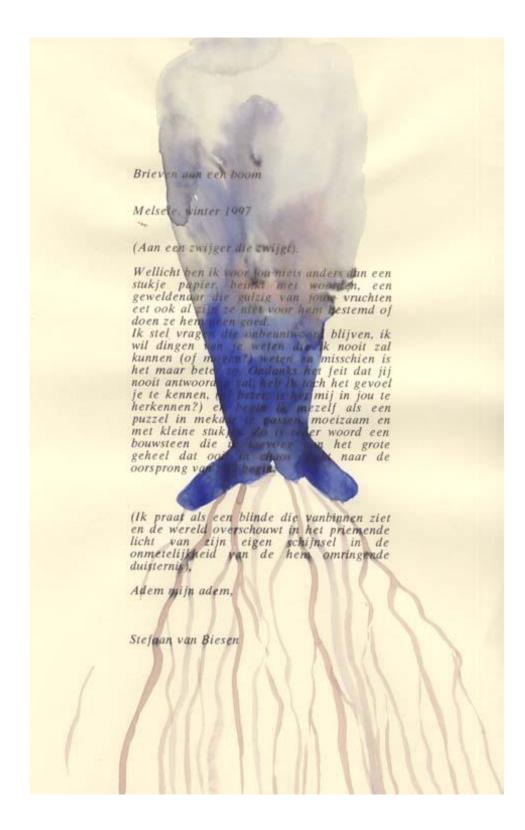
It is winter and yet spring is already on my train of thought. Strange how nothing is what is seems. How a life is a bundle of images, of endless endeavour.

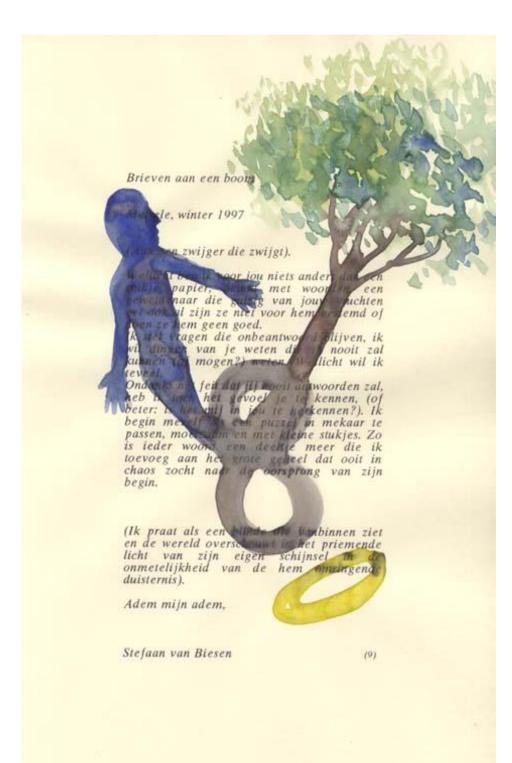
I am drawing you a tree the way I think you are.



(a thought for every day)

Keep silent, keep silent,





(To a silent one who is silent).

For you, I am probably nought but a piece of paper, inked up with words, a tyrant greedily eating your fruit, even if they are not meant for him or do not do him any good.

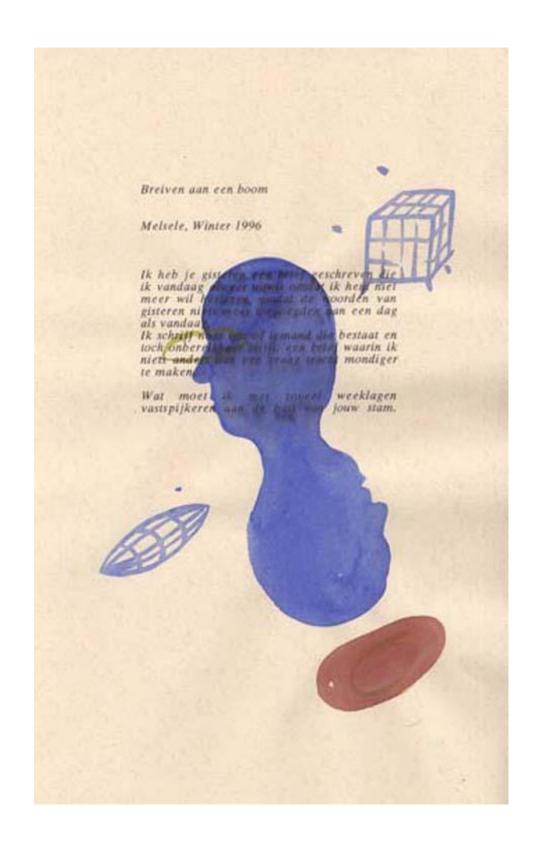
I pose questions that remain unanswered, I want to know things that I will never be able or allowed to know. I probably want too much.

In spite of the fact that you will never answer me, I still have the feeling that I know you, or rather, recognise myself in you?

I am starting to piece myself together like a puzzle, slowly and piece by piece. Thus, every word is a piece that I add to the whole, that once was looking in chaos for the origin of its origin.

(I talk like a blind man looking inside and surveying the world in the piercing light of his own shine in the immeasurability of the darkness that surrounds him).

Breathe my breath,





This week I have lived like a tree, or rather, like I think it is to be a tree. I caught a cold, which made me deaf in my left ear for a while. I heard nothing but an incessant rustling, like a snowstorm raging in the distance. Just for a moment, I was beyond reach, cut off from the sounds that were so familiar to me. I repeatedly had to bring them to mind. It was as if I had to dig from the scrapbook of my past. I lived from inside a memory.

I didn't even hear it when someone addressed me and similarly, the notbeing-heard was a strange experience for those who spoke to me. I was just like you: unreachable.

Deafness is a shield that protects against painful noises, against words that hurt when they penetrate the ear.

I am hearing again, yet the sounds stay strange and never heard even if they are caught in a head, a body, a wood full of life. This way, it is as if every cell listens to every sigh, as if every signal around me forces me to surrender to the compelling play of breathing and living.

If ever I learnt something from this writing the already thirteenth? letter to you, it is to get to know myself as uncomfortably deaf, a desperate listener to a tree on a day like this.

Brieven aan een boom

Melsele winter 1996

Ik heb deze yn gelee althans wa allen o boom te k een n doof in ets anders ulsof een dan in dat sneeu n draagt. kleine Even n van de 20 pu

Ik hoorat en op zijn oord worden oord worden een vreen woor degene die tegen hoorat wen net als jij: onbereikbad Doofheid is pijnlijke gen warden die kwetsen wanneg oor binnen vin en.

Ik ben ny veer horende en toch bij ven geluiden gemd en nog nooit gehoom to zijn ze angen in een hoofd, ean toch an een toch of leven. Zo is het alsof toch college kanar elke zucht, alsof elk signaat dat growingt mij dwingt mezelf over to

lk k ooit iets heb geleerd uit dit schrijven meg al de tiende brief naar jou):, dan is het mezelf te leren kennen als onwennig doof, een wanhopige luisteraar naar een boom op een dag als deze.

Stefaan van Biesen



Funny how one can fill a life trying nothing but to finalise a question, and how this endeavour can become a burden, too heavy to carry. Sometimes I picture myself as a tree, bending under the weight of its own leaves, of its own boughs that can break a giant, because they are laden with the heaviness of their hearts and the urge to grow excessively.

I see what words can bring about. I probably go looking where I don't have to look, I probably reread the words in which I read the excess of meaning, risking to lose myself.

Your silence is my stammering, your silence is my stubborn speaking. This is how I stand in the blue air, being the tree of countless thoughts that grow from each piece of branch out of nothingness, and that I have to let go in the autumn of all times not to smother myself. This is my mild harvest of living and being, until the shiny white axe will cleave my centre, splinter my innards and break my torso. Because silence doesn't mean not being able to talk, doesn't mean being defenceless. Who has the right to act pointlessly? Maybe this is my question: Who brings down, without realising that every stroke of the hammer kills part of himself with brute force?

Even if I can only stand by and watch powerlessly; I am still sovereign, I have my thoughts, I am the tree of memory and if I fall, the world will fall with me.

The remainder of countless days lies at your feet. The earth is rich through your lost harvest of years. You covered your place with this grey carpet that was once a green haze of light and life and that now covers the feet of your body against the biting cold that assaults us these days. Paralysed as snow-clad statues in a frosty landscape.

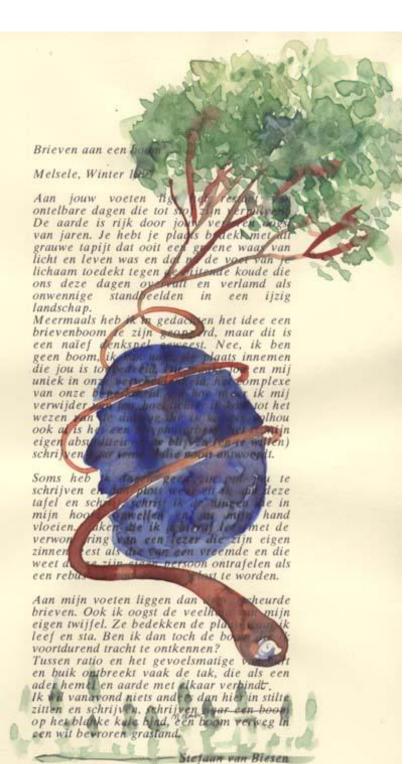
More than once, I mentally suggested the thought that I was a letter-tree, but this has been a naive mind game. No, I am not a tree, I can never take the place allotted to you. This makes you and me unique in our diversity, the complexity of our limitation. And the more I distance myself from you, the closer I get to the core of the dialogue that I stubbornly keep up, even if it is a Sisyphean task. It is my own absurd wish to keep writing someone who never answers.

There are days I don't feel like writing to you and yet suddenly, there I am again writing at this table, writing down all that enters my head. Words I subsequently read with the amazement of a stranger, yet knowing they are unravelling my own person like a rebus.

The ripped up letters are then lying at my feet. I too reap the multitude of my own doubts. They cover the place where I live and stand. Am I the tree that I am constantly denying after all?

Between ratio and the feelings of heart and stomach, the vein connecting heaven and earth is often missing.

Tonight, I want nothing else but to write here in silence, to write on the blank bald leaf, to a tree far away in a frozen meadow.



Account with own brown

Metalle, Winter 1997

estant van Aan verpulverd. onte erloren oogst De o dekt met dit van j ne waas van grauw licht e voet van je lichaan le koude die verland als ons de Standbertaen een ijzig onwen landsc

Meermaalt heb ik III verkelven het idee een brieve he maar dit is een nell had maapet geween. Nee, ik ben geen bom, ik kan mood de flaats innemen die jougt toegeteeld. Dit matkt jou en mij uniek it onze verscheidenheid, het complexe van onze beperksheid. En had meer ik mij verwijde van jou, noe de het ik koppig volhou ook al is et een Nevpinsaarbeid; het is mijn eigen abstrattet in te blijven (en te willen) schrijven kaur temand die zooit antwoordt.

Soms heb a docen very zin om jou te schrijven en dan op ver zit ik aan deze tafel en schrij very if de dingen die in mijn hoofd anweiten en uit mijn hand vloeien. Zaken die ka tchteraf lees met de verwondering van en lezer die zijn eigen zinnen leest all die van en vreemde en die weet dat ze zin etwen ver on ontrafelen als een rebus die war he ver verens te worden.

Aan meter liggen aan de verscheurde brieven. Ook ik oogst de veelheid van mijn eigen twijfel. Ze bedekken de plaats waar ik leef et ei

ssen ratio en het gevoelsmatige van vet a buik ontbreekt vaak de tak, die als der hemel en aarde met elkaar verbind. wil anavond niets anders dan hier in sture 21. Schrijven schrijven naar een boom op det bloom op det bloom taken bevord in een wit bevroren grastana.

Stefaan van Biesen

Brieven aan een boom



The lure of power and violence is apparently lost on you. You don't bend under the weight of your crown. You are indifferent to the silly little game that people play in the few hours of their existence, because it is unimportant. They are fighting against themselves. Alienation is starting to possess their world. They have no roots anymore like you. They have become mere heads without bodies, shells full of airiness that float and have gone adrift like a lost meteor in its own universe.

I realise now that we have to look more at your silence, your standing there; your silence tries to show something; there are other ways that had escaped us. You cause no harm, you leave everybody be in your dominant modesty.

In the olden days of China, people "embraced the tree", like I try to do today with the same intentions and intensity, mentally and physically. Nothing is new, nothing has not been invented yet. It is there for the taking, for those willing to look at what is standing next to them, waiting to be touched and moved.

This is how I stand in thought like a tree, thinking of my Tai Chi teacher Ellen, and Annemie. They taught me to listen to what lives deep on the inside, an "I" that is completely free from "the dark" that I once had to undergo. Just like you, I let the river flow starting from the great Nothing that is unmentionable.

I embrace the tree, in us, in you and me.

Brieven aan een boom

Melsele, winter 1991

De lokroep van machten teweld is blijkbaar niet aan jou besteed hij elicht niet onder het geweld van je krum. Het kleine domme spel dat mensen spele in de uren van hun bestaan laat je onverschilig omdat het onbelangrijk in Ze vechen met zichzelf. Vervreemeine maast on meester van hun wereld met belen geen wortels meen taat je en belster vol vluchtighen aan weeten i losgeslagen als een veral water met van zijn eizen maas

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ik in gedachten als een boom en denk die me hebben geleerd te luisteren naar wat leeft diep binnenin, een "lk" dat niets meer heeft van "het duistere" dat ik ooit moest ondergaan. Ik laat net als jou (en hen) de stroom vloeien vanuit het grote Niets dat onnoembaar is.

Ik omhels de boom, (in ons, in mij en jou),

Stefaan van Biesen

Brieven aan een boom

Melsele, winter 1997

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In het oude Chin zoals ik vandaa dezelfde intent lichaamlijk. N uitgevonden, he degene die wit te wachten worden. en de boam te do n de mentaa n no grijpen aast hen staat en beroerd te

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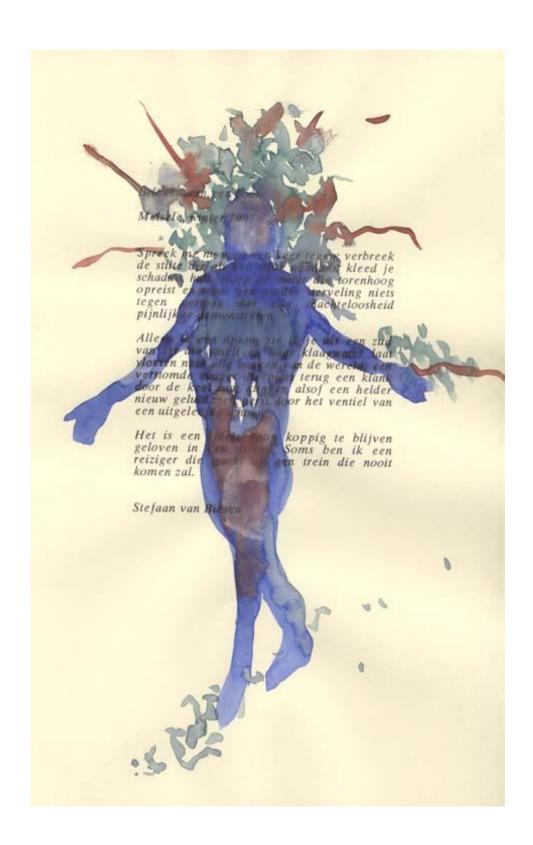
Ik omhels de boom, (in ons, in mij en jou),

Stefaan van Biesen

Just disagree with me for once! Break the silence that cloaks your shadow like a taut and seamless robe. Tear down the wall that towers sky-high and to which an earthly mortal can do nothing but demonstrate his impotence painfully.

Only in a dream I see you like a pillar of ice melting and allowing its waters of lamentation to flow to all the far-off corners of the world; a silenced singer who suddenly sends another sound through his throat, a clear but strange sound that has to wriggle itself through the neck of a fragile chimney.

An idle hope it is to stubbornly keep believing in a dream. Sometimes, I am a traveller waiting for the train that never comes



(concerning Koch's test)

Everyone draws a tree from memory the way he sees it. It is the tree of memory that is different and unique for everyone. People allow themselves to be read vulnerably through this. Every detail reveals something of the mental condition of the maker. On the basis of the acquired picture, one can determine one's talents and shortcomings: frightening when falling in the wrong hands, fascinating as an analytical piece of work.

Not long ago, a nine-year-old girl gave me a picture of a tree. It surprised me: The picture was filled with several signs, like they can be found in the so-called primitive cultures. She had even incorporated a cross in it. Immediately, Joseph Beuys came to mind and I realised again that there is no barrier between the memory and the actions. That we are all carrying the same pictures within us, locked up in every cell of our body, even if we reject nature in ourselves. It is the old - but not unravelled - thread of Ariadne that links and binds us to what we had forgotten.

There is always a here, a now, a moment. But me, I am always different. I show myself in my humble body to hide myself visibly. Unlike you, I cannot stand and die without inheriting tomorrow that grabs me and holds me in its grasp.

The mind too is subject to gravity, and fear of heights is the feeling of shame that has been invented for me because I fail in every attempt to reach for what is waiting for me there, sky-high.

(I ask myself):

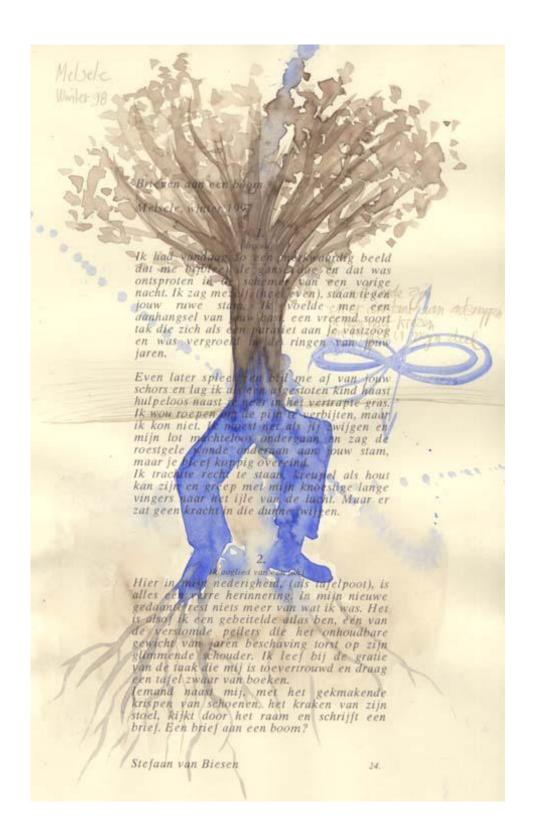
What is the definition of a letter when I invite you to read my days in thoughts?

How did you get me this far, to make me keep up this compulsiveness, this unruly discipline, like a belief in self-created lies?

How does your day go by?

Is every thought a budding leaf waiting to bloom, so that you can reread yourself in the middle of summer?

Is every question not a musing without an answer, or am I unintentionally writing the book I never wanted to write?



1 (dream)

Today, I received such a strange image from the twilight of a previous night. It stayed with me all day long. I saw myself, just for a second, standing against you rough bark. I felt like I was an extension of your bark, a strange kind of branch, sucked fast to you like a parasite, and fused in the rings of your years.

A moment later, an axe cleaved me from your bark, and I was lying almost helpless in the grass, like a disowned child next to you in the trampled grass. I wanted to shout to stifle the pain, but I couldn't. I had to remain silent just like you, and carry my fate powerlessly. I saw the rusty yellow wound at the base of your trunk, but you kept standing up steadfastly.

I tried to stand up, crippled as wood can be, and my knotty long fingers grabbed at the thinness of the air. But there was no power in my thin twigs.

2

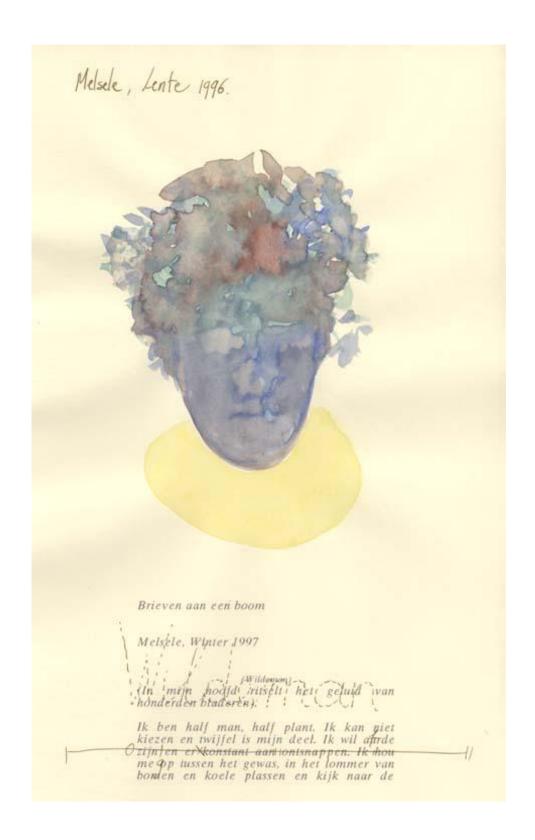
(lamentation of a bough)

In my humble existence as a table-leg, everything is a distant memory. In my new shape, nothing is left of what I once was. It is as if I am a sculptured Atlas, one of the muted pillars carrying the unbearable weight of years of civilisation on a shiny shoulder. I live by the task assigned to me and I carry a table heavy with books.

While the creaking of his shoes and chair is making me crazy, somebody next to me is looking out the window and writing a letter. A letter to a tree?

A pale trunk is hiding in the early spring mist. At the extremity of every twig, the chilly dew is sparkling like a tiny water crystal. As a whole, this resembles a jagged wooden chandelier but upside down, anchored in the earth and hanging towards heaven. Silently and breathlessly, he dangles in the haze to light the firmament. In the improvised ballroom of the early morning, the sound of twittering blackbirds fades away.

Mere seconds, then this wondrously beautiful spectacle dissolves in the lukewarm rays of a winter sun that casts my long low shadow on the frozen ground. My breath escapes me like a volatile vapour, and so, all the garden of my small world is filled with speechlessness pinning me to the ground like a tree. Here, I am no longer the child that has to choose between falling and getting up hesitantly, in fragile equilibrium.



(wild man) (The sound of a thousand leaves is rustling in my head).

I am half man, half plant. I cannot choose and I am subject to doubt. I want to be earth and I want to escape it continuously. I linger amongst the undergrowth, in the shade of the trees and the coolness of the puddles, looking up at the heavens that are begging me to fly there. Thus, I waste precious time pondering and thinking, and at the end of the day I am so tired and empty-minded that I cannot lift another foot, and fall into a deep sleep. Then, I float dreaming in the black cool waters where constellations mirror themselves in the surface that is rippled by my restless breathing.

I can no longer count the days, I no longer remember the endlessly agonising questions. This division in me is the sum of years of inner torment. I am a fable, I am neither tree nor animal, but I am! I am a god without commandments, an ear pressed to the grass listening to the silent drum of mother earth.



Yesterday evening, with the deep blue first sign of a night full of longing for spring, I tasted that bitter taste again. The tree I often greeted has disappeared from the landscape. A tree full of past, a gnarled loner, a silent witness of days gone by. His disappearance is the disappearance of an era. Something you always carry with you, whether you want it or not.

Naked is the churned up meadow, no scenery remains unspoilt, nothing remains but the memory until that too is faded.

Last night, I planted a new tree, between dreaming and waking, somewhere in the middle of my head. I let it grow like a giant, bearing and buttressing the heaven of my world.

Spiritus, (breath and mind)

The street lantern at the other side of the street is swaying in the dusk. The light is dancing like a shining Cyclops, looking down on the earth and shaking his head and wondering why there is so much noise at this late hour. The rain is pelting down on the roofs in the howling wind. The street is deserted. Only one person is fighting his way along the rows of houses, taken by surprise by the storm. He is like a toy in the wind. The storm keeps howling like a motherless child that is begging to be heard. Small branches have been ripped off and are whirling over the paving. I am listening to the rage of spring and hold my breath for a second. In the strange endlessness of a second, everything ceases to exist and my eyes no longer see what is happening outside the window. I look inside myself and see your crown bow painfully above your trunk, I see that you are stretching yourself like a spring not to break.

And in the middle of all this noise, suddenly a silence descends in me like a veil and I shiver with the quivering leaf that stops flapping aimlessly on the tried and tested branch. And then I understand that everything is movement in semblance of silence, that every part (in me as well as inside your bark) sets itself the task to survive all the noise from the outside world.

How often and how many tempests have to rise and die in me before I find that silence for which I have been craving so intensely and for such a long time?

Melsele-Heusden, winter 1997

(Under mine)

Sometimes, the earth throws up a small pile of sand: a mole is digging a tunnel to the light. Just for a moment, the animal shows itself vulnerably, but it quickly disappears again in its subterranean network of self-made tunnels. Its restlessness shows in the hidden tangle of hollow veins crisscrossing the soil between your roots, where no maggot escapes. The faces, once dirtied with coal dust, can never be cleaned. The grey coal mountains become silenced volcanoes of past times.

In dark tunnels where the sound of voices has died away, the mole blindly digs a way, outlawed by those adoring a flawless lawn. He devours the vermin gnawing at your roots.

I stamp the earth and imagine I make it tremble, hoping to reach you with my powerless asking. Sometimes I am the miner who lost his way in the endless corridors. Until the last light is put out, the words smothered and their sound echoed against the bare wall, I know that every answer undermines itself.

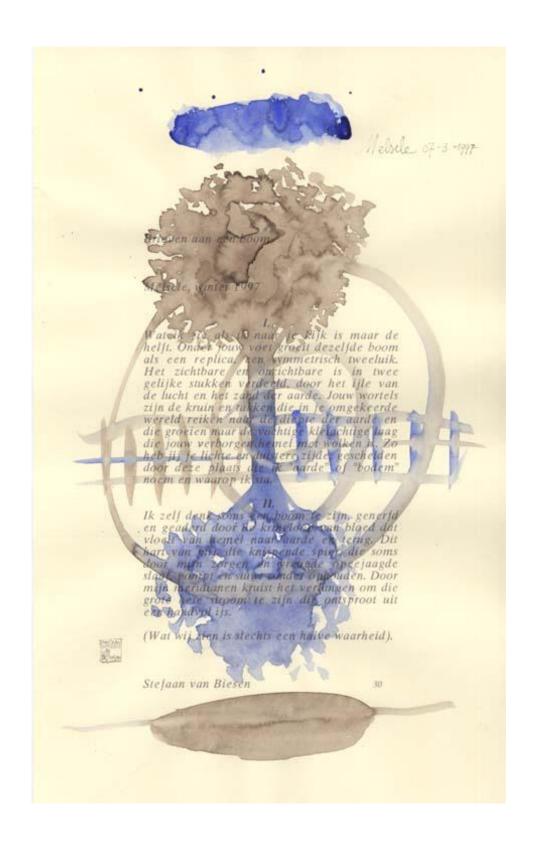
(My body is a house)

The quiet street with the same houses, one of which I call my own. A flawless lane with similar trees, lifeless front gardens, nicely swept pavements. This multitude of order and sacrosanctity impoverishes me.

Every house is hiding its sorrows, on every door there are knocks of worn out hands. These houses are fortresses of keeping up appearances, hard façades of crumbling happiness that remain standing in spite of wind and rain. Façades that silently celebrate their alleged indestructibility, like an imposed victory. Invincible, stone titans in a listless double row, side by side.

Volcanoes never sleep. Chimneys are belching out their smoky breath of dust and soot. The door here is sporting my name for him who is to find me.

With one finger on the bell, the pedlar of dreams knows that he knocks on this door with his hand balled by a question, less to get to know this world than to make it livable. Thus, this letter is a knocking on the door of the house I call body. Those who lay their hand upon your trunk, are knocking without knowing it.



I.

What I see when I look at you is only half of you. Under your feet, the same tree is growing, like a replica, a symmetrical diptych. The visible and the invisible are divided into two equal parts, by the thinness of the air and the sand of the earth. Your roots are the crown and the branches, that reach for the depths in the up-side-down world and that grow towards the moist and clayey layer that is your hidden sky with clouds. Thus you have a light and a dark side, separated by the place I am standing on.

What we see is but a half-truth.

II.

I think I am a tree myself sometimes, nerved and veined by the cycle of blood that flows from sky to earth and back. This heart of mine, that pulsating muscle, that slave sometimes hunted by my sorrows and joys, pumping and pushing without stopping. The desire to be that big hot stream that sprouted from a handful of ice is crossing through my meridians.

(chi)

Today, I saw the first sign. The first shy budding of a new season. And deep down inside me I hope it won't stop, that I haven't been dreaming with my eyes open. Because my hunger for the coming season is a hunger of feeling again that lukewarm stream that flows from my stomach to every remote corner of my whole being. It is as if a leaf is preparing to sprout forth from every finger. I force myself to take it all in silently, to forget myself for a while and store everything around me in the huge depot of memory.

I can already see the green that is surging from your wooden belly. I hear the swishing of your new leaf. The earth is crying its heart out from the growing pains that have no remedy. Change is in me, my body is melting like a soppy snowman and asking to be cleansed. The residue of passed days in my veins is slowing me down, but elsewhere the luring call resounds in endless echoes.

This letter too is again a new start, an upcoming sign.

(a pruning hand)

The hand of the man pruning the tree betrays his doubt. I can see him clambering between the boughs. I hear the creaking of the wood, the panting after every effort to climb higher and higher in the crown.

I am standing on the ground, watching him with the disbelief of a child, the sudden paralysis of one who suffers from fear of heights. The man is doing what I tell him to do. I am his guide. His black steal clippers cut shreds of light and air in the tree.

Who is claiming the right to not let the tree grow unhindered until his crown suffocates like a dark cloud in the thickness of its foliage? Who claims to know how to prune a tree carefully, without remorse, because pruning is at once a form of art and irrevocable?

Pruning is always pruning to a likeness. The tree that you have carried with you all your life from the day you were born.

Brieven aan een boom

Melsele, Lente 1997

(Linear, zondag)

Ik heb vandaag Marc voor het eerst ontmoet, de eruikete grissaard die vand met de boom naast zijn kais en die hij bijna dagelijks onhelst. De jonge hoom is een teus geworden en lijkt honderd jaar oud. Vreemd wat woorden en lege handen vol tederheut kunnen doen met de zwijgenden der natuur: ze Tijn stil maar niet ongevoelig voor de stem in ons die spreekt vanuit het hart.

Zo is zijn groeien naar de wolken tonen dat hij weet, dat hij die mens daar beneden achterlaat en dat hij door te groeien naar het blauw van de hemel de kleiner wordende man aan zijn voet toont dat hij het fluisteren verstaat, dat woorden nooit verspilling zijn.

Als een soort van vluchtige meststof, voor groeipijn en meer, schrijf ik nogmaals een brief, wetende dat ik niets weet.

Stefaan van Biesen

33

(Latem, Sunday)

Today, I met Marc for the first time, the erudite old greybeard who talks to the tree next to his house. He embraces him almost daily.

The young tree has become a giant and looks like it is a hundred years old. How strange the influence of words and empty hands on the silent creatures of nature: they are silent but not insensitive to the voice speaking from our hearts.

His unrestrained growing to the clouds is probably a way to let us know that he understands the man's whispering. A materialised sign that words are never lost if they are uttered in a breath of reconciliation.

Like a kind of fleeting fertiliser, for growing pains and more, I write you again, knowing I know nothing.

(standing like a birch)

Sometimes I clam up and become that mangy dog showing its teeth out of frustration and despair. Because the obstacle before me is great and alive.

The man with the axe in his head chops the landscape bare with his words and leaves everything disconsolate for those who listened to him. The true Sisyphus is he who drags along his own body like a heavy burden, the millstone around his neck. It immobilises his thoughts.

Me, I carry within myself the sadness of every nomad who secretly knows he has lost his roots, and who is cursed to roam forever, searching for the image of the place that keeps looming in his memory like a bad dream. The rudderless ship dropping anchor in a bottomless sea.

In the landscape, you are a point of comparison. I eat your fruit like medicine, I drink your pushing sap as the renewal of a promise.

(body against body)

I saw you avert your head from the tree you were leaning against. I saw how your hands barely moved in the grey light, the first hour of the morning and how your embrace was almost a caress.

Wordless is the unnameable ritual of the profoundest fulfilment. Gestures we inherited from parent to child.

Both son and daughter are standing here and now, both heirs. No scenery seems unspoilt now, but in the glowing warmth of our wan white hands, the longing for touching the original forest grows and grows.

In the head of the fisherman, hauling the heavy nets from the water, slumbers the shy hope to find something that dumbfounds him amongst the struggling of his silvery white catch.

Possibly it is the sculpture of an old and long forgotten deity, lifted from the bottom and, entangled in the nets, showing itself again to the servants of sea and winds. Thus, a new and unknown age-old world reveals itself and the sculpture desires nothing but to sink back into the blackness of the ocean. Tired of the worship of days long gone, it wants to sleep and forget everything forever.

In you lives the desire to be reborn time and again from the breath of a severe season, slowly wakening from a winter sleep.

In me then lies the hope of the fisherman, the disbelief of the miracle that happens time after time. Then, in this early morning hour, I cherish the coming of century-old beauty, the sculpture of a new era entangled in my nets. Something to refresh me in times of unquenchable thirst. Maybe my thoughts are wriggling fishes around your static body that is slowly starting to bloom?

I.

Biting in an apple, I taste the sweet and healing sap that sprang from you. I taste the merciful gift to the parched throats of this earth.

II.

In the orchard of my memory, the grass is dappled with apples. They gleam like yellowed jewels until they lose their lustre because of patches full of sun, falling from your crown. And you are just standing there, like a green frozen fountain, straight up on your pedestal of sand and earth. A living monument, an image of soft and silent strength.

III.

(propolis)

Bees spy for the resin flowing from your inner layers. The sticky substance that cleanses and closes their hive.

They are milking your dew. The ingredient for the yellow ambrosia that is carried into the teeming hive, stuck to heavily loaded paws.

The wooden giant and his golden yellow workers are part of a system that brings us nothing but questions and amazement. Nature only reveals her mystery sparsely. Often, we can only surmise. Every new discovery is astonishment.

I.

I would like to write about "nothing". Just sit here, stare at the rainy spring day and muse.

Whatever could I write to you about today? About the fact that there can only be Good because there is Bad? Or about the fact that life has been so harsh upon some people that they can't bear the light of day anymore, and only roam the streets at night, skittishly, like the bat darting around your crown?

Then I have to confess: the paper on which this is written, and in which I recognise your trunk's filaments, is infinitely too small for what I want to report to you.

II.

The Japanese cherry in our small garden is flowering. It is a big rosy bouquet standing before me and asking me: "do not avert your eyes, look and live". But that too is greater than a thousand letters could say.

I now realise the sad destiny of the writer who wanted to write a book about life. Only when he is old, tired and washed out, it is brought home to him that even a whole library filled with books cannot explain the miracle of a spring day such as this one.

Every now and again, I happen across a day in which all my life, all my possessions seem to be little more than a shabby briefcase glued to my side. I abhor it, because it exposes my attachment to material things in a most striking manner. I, who once said I never wanted to possess anything.

Whether I am waiting for the train or sitting in a room, there is always that hand grabbing for this leather object with its slight contents. It does not contain much, and yet, my whole life is couched in this little thing. How often have I reviled it, because I know I cannot live without it! This small extension of my arm, the lunchbox of my mind, has become indispensable to me.

This is my own image of myself: standing on a quay, waiting for a train. My right hand squeezing a faded handle, betraying the joy or pain that is growing inside me.

You too probably drag the inheritance of many years along with you. You roof of leaves that weighs like a heaven upon you.

(It is snowing blossoms in the garden. Something to remember always.)

I.

(I draw my shadow)

I say that I am a house, a furnished room full of small souvenirs that cling to me when I close the door behind me. The relics of times gone by that I want to see again when I turn the cold metal key in the lock of the door that grinds with the familiarity of my own doubts.

But where do I live when I read myself like a stranger? When I turn around seeing nothing but my shadow gliding along the wall, knowing it will never really leave me alone?

It may be my shadow too is looking for what lies behind him, looking for the human being I am not? Or does he see in me nothing but an accidental shine of light?

II.

I lock myself up in letters, I hide behind words and yet I allow myself to be read like an open book. What is it I am looking for? Probably to stand in this world and be an unmistakable part of a landscape, just like you, a familiar obstacle.

A swaying sundial, that is what I am in rereading this letter. Then I am throwing my shadow on the ground, just like you. An intangible spot full of light.

(looking at Hale-Bopp)

In this violently blue night, the light of the stars takes shape on a transparent, velvet canvas. Somewhere, hidden between innumerable sources of light, my thoughts drift along with the tail of the comet. Because in between your branches, a revolving rock of ice roams like a wandering bride with a long, misty, white veil of dust and gas trailing behind her.

An owl dives into your crown and skims over my head. The anonymous king of the night, ruling over the nest of longing that you harbour and hold with your branches.

Heavenly body, plant, animal, human. Every one of them a component in dialogue with the others. An image of unity full of diversity, the big ligsaw waiting to be completed.

And you stand between the moon and me, with uplifted hands.

(dream and time)

I was standing at the edge of the abyss and I spoke. And the sound fell open in the gorge and faded away. This small word from my mouth hit the hard layers below me and built up like an infernal dissonant chord, as if a thousand-fold of voices had broken loose from me and shouted at me. The further it receded from me, the deeper it fell until it reached the bottom of my soul, that could hardly bear this and that broke within me like a fresh egg.

I stood there bent forward looking into the chasm, and I saw nothing of myself that I didn't recognise. And even though the space beckoned me to jump into her arms like a failed Icarus, the power to one day reveal this incomprehensible oracle was so strong that I went to stand on the very edge of the rock and gave myself completely to the whirling song of the winds that tugged at my clothes and teased me with an almost sensual lust to take the step after all.

What had once started as faltering was now pounding like a battering ram on the thin skin of my conscience. It was a hurricane, the house of dreams ripped to pieces, and I myself had unchained that power unknowingly, with one simple word escaped from a body of many silent years. And the more I grew silent, the louder the echo boomed in my hollow head. I staggered like one stupefied. I reeled and vaguely I saw before me the sheer cliff with here and there a tuft of grass sucked to the rock face, a blue sky with a few stray clouds that had got caught around a mountaintop. I witnessed endless beauty in so much endlessness, and my own futility seemed mirrored in it.

I took everything around me into account as if the landscape had me under her spell through her magic.

No, I had not fallen, even though I was lured by the abyss. But inside me, a weight had come falling from nowhere that had made me totter, and that pinned me down on the rock beneath me with leaden legs.

Outwardly I was undamaged, but under the skin, forgotten scar tissue suddenly came to surface again between falling and standing back up, between stammering and speaking. And with them they brought the pain of a faraway memory.

If you fall so deep without hitting ground, you cannot but circle anxiously like a wingless bird around the nest of dreams that dangles from the highest branch sprouting from your trunk.

II.

(letter to a tree)

Silent friend. This is a dream on midday. One of the many haunting our minds, but real in the other world also living inside us. We often don't recognise that world as true and it slumbers between sleeping and knowing. I often have the impression that, in an endless fraction of time, another voice within us whispers something to us as if the sound comes from a different and hidden world. You too are intangible like that, an eccentric grown silent, a familiar part of my universe but hermetical in spite of all. You have given yourself a different place in this world: that of the living but silent one. And even if I can touch you, there is the chasm between us in which my words reverberate; my letters dissolve in the green avalanche of your crown. Your silence and my letters to you are not pointless. I have learnt to know you; I have learnt.

Letter to a tree

'There is no eternity for things we can touch'

A small library leans against your trunk, several meters above the ground. On a branch that seems to turn away from you, I place what I saw when I was here last: a number of books glued together and therefore rendered unreadable, put together in this small bookcase. The books are leaning against a nesting-box and are inextricably bound to each other by means of the metal pin that has been pushed through all of them. I am the silent witness, experiencing how unattainable knowledge can be, how out of reach life sometimes is.

Here, in this piece of nature, birds and other animals live according to unwritten laws. They live by bio-systems, making sure the species is maintained, acting out of taught behaviour. It makes me think of what Annemie V. St. told me after she had just returned from a scientific congress about Alzheimer's disease in New York. She told me that several scientific teams in the world are studying the brains of birds to conquer this disease. Birds learn to sing by hearing the older males sing. The females have exactly the same physical abilities to sing, but only the males sing in the summer because in this time of the year, the bodies of the male birds undergo a hormonal change that enables them – or gives them the urge - to sing. It is namely testosterone, a male hormone, that brings about this change in them.

In ancient cultures, birds were seen as "aerial bodies" or "animals from the higher spheres". Thus, they were considered to be messengers: they formed a tangible bridge between mankind and the deity. These mythical explanations hint at an ancient quest and the fascination of our ancestors for the knowledge of other inhabitants of our planet. And if I take time to dwell upon the issue, it baffles me again how this "flying" is so taken for granted by birds, while it is still a mystery to mankind, as if one or the other hidden knowledge was only revealed to them and not to us.

Science is looking for solutions to unanswered questions and looking at your bark, at the books your branches are carrying, I wonder whether we will ever know anything. Whether mankind will be able to reach for the knowledge revealing the secret of life. We try to find an explanation for incomprehensible problems. The hunger to understand the systems that present us with riddles, are a source of all kinds of theories, trying to give us an idea of what and who we are. About how we should lead our lives. Nature, however, determines everything through a network of experiences and genetic characteristics.

While I am standing here, I am the one looking at a materialised question. The inaccessibility of knowledge can be a torment of Tantalus. My innate curiosity is a "feast of thought" to me. There is one image that I always carry with me: the scientist versus the artist, each in their own lab – the atelier of the artist, the laboratory of the scientist – each looking for a solution in their self-appointed solitude.

But I also often find myself wondering whether all this searching for answers, even though it enlarges our insight in this world and its nature, will not confront us ever more with the one insoluble question that eclipses all the others: what is the meaning of our existence, of this intangible and incomprehensible life? I leave the park thinking of the quotation of Barnet Newman I was sent by Giles Thomas this week, after our conversation here: "Art theory is to artists what ornithology is for birds".

I am just another person to visualise one of the many questions in the landscape. Probably, I should stop "asking". It is here that I come to declare my insignificance to nature. My powerlessness to explain is a recognition and an extravagant enjoyment of nature's beauty, and I know that perception is a subjective standard of values indicating that I love and live this life to the full.

Letter: provisional version February 2003

Deadwood

One day or the other, the man with the axe will come. He won't look at you. He will kneel and the sun will reflect dully on the axe. He will clean and sharpen the bent steal blade. It is his job, he was told to do so. He will spit in his hands. It is a ritual that ensures the success of his work.

The first blow of the metal into the trunk will make him feel the resistance of the damp wood, a stubbornness he wants to break. It is a feeling of power. The small man bringing down the high tree. His muscles will contract around his bones and he will groan with each heave. Every blow will be accompanied by a diphthong, an echo on the wall. All his attention will be focused on the sharpness of the axe. Your bark will splinter; you will be overturned, as if an elongated shadow bends over the place. A falling veil.

That night, he will burn a bushel of deadwood in the fireplace. Branches once carrying the rustling of leaves. Streaming veins pushing the colourless sap upwards. And in the crackling fire, you will dissolve, volatile like ether. Your silhouette will dance. Like a shadow lost in smoke, you will spread over the streets, over the landscape.

And at night, waking up from a strange dream, the man sees the giant coming down, hears the cracking of the branches under the weight of a solid trunk of many years old.

Trimmings are lying on my sidewalk, waiting for someone to warm himself to my multitude of words, to the glow that shines from the smouldering pieces of wood that are left. I too gather wood, and poke up my words in the fireplace of the eternal thought. The letters I burn are made from your trunk. Sometimes I am the man with the axe, but I hesitate.

Melsele, Lenke 1999.

Brief aan een boom

Een of andere day kom an man me de bijl. Hij zal je niet aankijken. Dij zal knieten en de bijl zal dof blinken in de zon. Hij zal ze schoonmaken en scherpen. Het is hem gezegd, hat is zijl werk. His zal in de handen spuwen. Een rincel dat def vacht van arbeid bezegelt.

Bij de eerst slag van het metaalfin de stam zal hij de weerstand van het vochtige hoor voelen, een stugheid die hij wil breken. Het geeft een gevoel van macht. De kleine man die de hoge boom velt. Hij zal zijn spieren opspannen en kreunen bij tedere haal. Bij elke slag een tweeklank, een echo op de muur. Je bast zal versplinteren, je zal kantelen, alsof een langgerekte schaauw zich buigt over de piek. Een sluier die valt.

's Avonds zal hij een in del sprokkelhout verbranden in de haard. Takken die ook een bos van bladeren droegen. Stromende adere die het kleurloze sap omhoog stuwden. En in het knetteren van het vuur zal het oplossen, vluchtig als einen. Je silhouet zal dansen en als een schim die opstat in rook zul je je versprenden over de straten theer het landschap. En 's nachts, ontwakend undern vreemde droom, ziet de man de reus vallen, hoork aar het kraken van de takken onder een massieve stam van jaren oud.

Snoeihout ligt voor mijn stoep en wacht op iemand die zich wil verwarmen aan de veelheid van mijn woorden, aan de glaed die straalt vanuit het kmedlend hoopje takken dat nog rest. Ook ik sprokkel hout, ik slook mijn woorden op in de haard van de eeuwige gedachte. Brieven die ik verbrand zijn uit je stam gemaakt. Soms ben ik de man met de bijl, maar ik aarzel.

Stefaan van Biesen

Melsele, 1997 (dark sides)

Slowly, like the hands of a clock, my shadow glides over the grass. I am the needle pin-pricked through the skin of a new day and I feel the tension on the crossroads of the meridians glide away below me like a big river.

I have drawn my shadow in the shifting sand. My impalpable likeness that can only be quieted by darkness. Here, I am an archaeologist looking for missing pieces to complete the broken vase of desire. A digger looking for his place on earth, scraping away time and again in his self-dug grave.

This is the site of the conscience, the cradle of my restlessness, where the gleaming spade sings, while I listen to myself reading what I wrote to you. And I hear my words as if they were another's. Thus my profile glides over the ground distressingly slowly, contours of shadow and light, marking the time. Burrowing like a mole, I create a fan of sand. The past is dug up, what had been forgotten is brought to surface from the deeper layers. Eroded figures that I scatter during the space of twenty-four hours at the foot of your crown.

And you maintain your silence, as if the echo of every word bounces from your round and sturdy trunk. I hear nothing but the rustling of your dark leaves. Again, this is a last letter. Or at least a hopeless attempt to reach you by standing next to you in sympathetic silence.

Living in an Orchard street

The name of the street I live in reveals its origin and its past. It is like a buried dream only living on through its name. A dream that just wants to keep on dreaming.

Innumerable words hang from the branches of the orchard that I am. Thoughts looking for a quiet way let go of the branch, with a silent sigh of relief, to be lost in the earth I am standing on.

Sometimes, the thought is an old man remembering the way things used to be around here. His words blend into an image. It is not a reality, but a self-constructed truth: the powerlessness to remember, know and feel the things that were. And yet the orchard lives in this house, I hear the rustling sound of a million leaves in the wind that whips the northern house fronts in wintertime. In the steady tapping of the rain, I hear voices telling about the days of old, I hear the peals of laughter of far forgotten children playing under your crown. And I see a landscape that lives in me, an illusion I cherish against my better judgement. A synthesis of the landscape that I am myself.

Sometimes, the thought is a piece of barbed wire grown into your trunk. A marking made by time. A stubborn seam is all that is left. Musing, I see myself leaning against your trunk, sitting in the shade, away from the burning sun in the late afternoon. Outside, the first snow starts to fall.

the tenant

I am the one waiting in rooms full of impatience, that fill their emptiness with breath. The sound of words reverberates against the walls, a timeless membrane of memories.

I am the stranger who lives inside himself, the tenant of the upstairs floor, whose footsteps creak on the smooth wooden floor. His unrest turns into mine when I hear his wandering about. The circle he traces through despair spreads like a ripple on a lake.

And I listen to his hesitating step, I ask myself questions. I know that an answer may break the magic of the moment forever. Riddles should remain unresolved. This is the task I have set myself, for the time that is left: trying to ask the question correctly, one step at a time, ever more and more.

Thoughts are growing rank like weeds in the lost garden of words. I rake them together like a pile of letters. I who am writing you. In the body that I am renting during this life like a temporary dwelling, and where I am restless and visibly hidden behind the curtains of myself.

Branch

I had an old schoolmate who chose to hang next to your trunk, stiffened like a winter leaf, on a taut rope.

He never said much. He laughed wearily when you asked him something. He was always there and yet always somewhere else.

Once, he asked me if I could share a secret with him. A silent one choosing to speak. He looked up to the sky and pointed at the heavens without a word, as if he would be that swallow. A first gesture, a sign for later.

I could do nothing but wordlessly feel, sense how it was to be caged and unable to break out. No force in or around him had been able to break the grating of his mind.

When I returned to you yesterday, little tree of mine, to the spot where they found him, I see in my mind that large and fleshy leaf hanging from your branches, in the big wood wherein he had been lost for years. That secret book had been sealed and closed forever. That big and breathless thing called man, unfathomable, jut like you now.

A thought can sometimes be an unbearable weight dragging at your trunk.

I am on the train this morning. The landscape is passing me by. A forest of trees is rushing past me and it looks like a farewell. A mass of swift green hands, waving me goodbye on a trip to anywhere.

Stefaan van Biesen