



WB

WRITER'S BLOCK

*Students' magazine for
writing, film & literature*

19

NADIA DE VRIES LIKES VODKA, EXOTIC BIRDS, AND 80S MUSIC. SHE ALSO WRITES.

THIRZA STUDIES FOR A MASTER DEGREE IN ENGLISH LITERATURE. SHE LOVES ANCIENT LANGUAGES, JEWELRY AND FAIRY TALES.

PAGE 6

BLURBS WRITERS WB NINETEEN

ROOS IS A PERSON JUST LIKE YOU, AND SHE CAN BE PRETTY FUNNY, TOO. SHE'S NOT TOO FOND OF IRISH STEW, AND HER POETRY IS MEDIOCRE AT BEST.

PAGE 5

JOICHEM MOSTLY LIKES TV SHOWS AND BOOKS ABOUT TIME (TRAVEL), ENJOYS THINKING AND WRITING ABOUT DINOSAURS AND THE MULTIVERSE, AND THINKS MAGNETS ARE TOTALLY COOL.

PAGE 18

ANNELIES: STUDENT. WORKER. WRITER. TRAVELLER. ADMIRER OF DICKENS AND DAHL. DREAMS OF OWNING AN ENGLISH BULLDOG. ALWAYS STAY CURIOUS!

PAGE 14

PAUL WRITES POETRY, SHORT STORIES, COLUMNS AND A BAZILLION UNFINISHED NOVELS.

PAGE 13&15

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CONTENT

HAVE IT WRITER'S BLOCK EDITORIAL 4 AND COMIC
ANIMALS SHORT STORY 5
TO THE EDGE OF THE DESERT FACTION 6
DEATHLESS REVIEW 10

POTATO SALAD SHORT STORY 11

ON THOUGHT POEM 13

A DAY IN THE LIFE: AT THE OFFICE SHORT STORY 14

ON THE DIRE EVIL THAT IS BEDS COLUMN 15

STEVE SMITH'S BOOKCASE INTERVIEW 16

BOBBY FIELDS SHORT STORY 18

ELYSIUM REVIEW 21

ESSAY COMPETITION

Maximum of 1500 words. Any topic you like. We want to see passion, creativity and like to be convinced! Deadline 1st of December. Send your work to writerssblock@gmail.com, subject Essay Competition.

HAVE IT WRITER'S BLOCK EDITORIAL

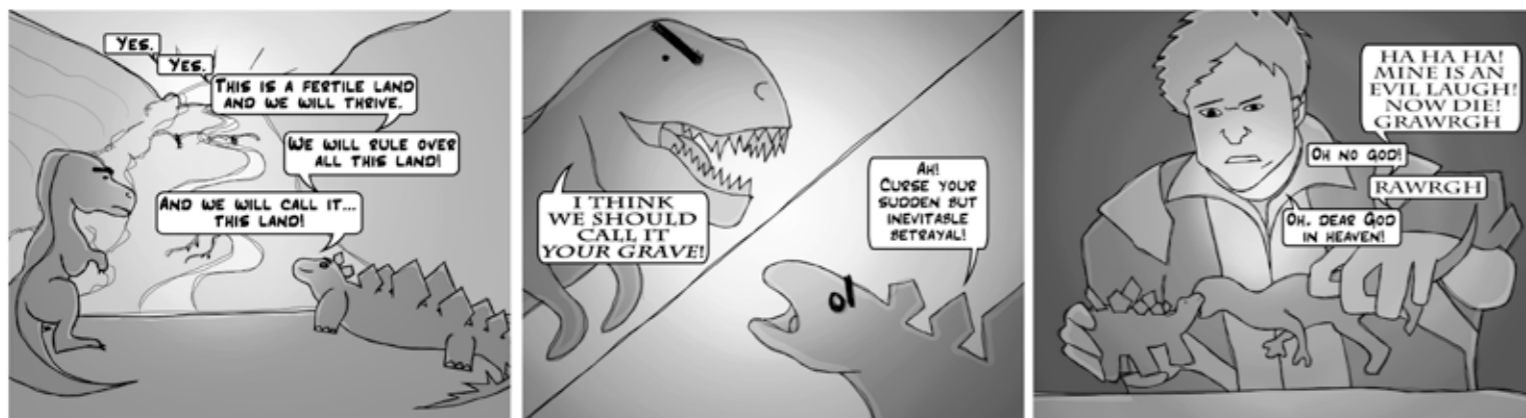
TEXT NORA VAN ARKEL AND ROBERT STELTENPOOL

Over the summer, many pens scratched the surface of papers, and many fingers translated ideas into letters on a screen to contribute inspiring work to Writer's Block. Tons of emails have been sent—editors discussing the texts with their writers, editors bitching about grammar, and editor-in-chiefs running to and fro to get things printed, together building on what you can now read and see on the next pages. This summer one of us has been wandering around in Berlin, discovering the literary side of the city and writing about it. I walked into deserted buildings that once were factories, now homes to people without another destination. I travelled the U-Bahn and S-Bahn endlessly while seeing the sun rise and set. I looked at the faces of all the people stopping to listen to a street musician late in the evening beside a bridge. I watched the protests and memories of a divided and rough city grow on the walls and persons walking by—detested or inspired by them, admiring them or ignoring them. The city has an infrastructure of stories, hiding in plain sight for the ones who will see them. In the meantime the green leaves are changing into red and brown, announcing that summer is losing its grip and that winter is creeping in closer and closer. We hope that as the green colours fade away the urge in you to write and read does not disappear with it. We want to read even more of what you create, rattling on your laptop, scribbling in your notebook. Great initiatives like the Amsterdam Writer's Guild are here to stimulate you to write as well, just as there is the Etcetera's Book Club to encourage you to read (reading *Brave New World* for the 19th of November). Writer's Block is here to help you with what you have written, to push you to reach the next stage of excellence if we can, to help you find confidence to write more and write better. Writer's Block is here to give you feedback from the perspective of readers as well as editors. Writer's Block is here to help you get started, instead of putting you down. We hope to see more of your work appear in our inbox soon, and wish you fun reading all the great stories, poems, reviews and more in this issue! **WB**

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/COMIC BY INES SEVERINO



ANIMALS SHORT STORY

TEXT ROOS SCHIFFER

'Such is the nature of all animals,' I think to myself as I wake up to the sound of my neighbors in the final throes of what sounds a lot like two giant tortoises having intercourse. I once witnessed two such reptiles 'getting it on' in a German zoological garden, an experience I still consider to be the most awkward public event I was ever a part of. A slightly embarrassed zookeeper threw an inordinate amount of cabbage at the shameless fornicators as I stood there, robbed of all innocence, watching an event so unholy even my atheist-as-fuck mom was crying blasphemy. It was pretty damn savage.

I get up and prepare some breakfast, still fascinated by the grunting and moaning and screaming and bleating that penetrates the wall of my –apparently not sound-proof- apartment, slightly disgusted, wallowing in self-pity as I stare at an impressive collection of empty wine bottles, none of which I remember sharing with a suitor. My mind starts to wander trying to recall even a faintest memory of making the beast with two backs, a euphemism I up to this day considered way too animalistic for homo sapiens. Me being a redhead I always thought my sex life would be wildly exciting, boy was I in for a disappointment (or should I say: anti-climax).

I don't know how long exactly I'd been standing at my kitchen counter, holding a pack of butter in one hand and a knife in the other, when all of a sudden I snap out of this trance-like state and notice someone knocking at my door. I give a deep sigh, slap myself in the face and look through the peephole to see who it is. It's a relatively unpleasant surprise, but I open the door anyway.

'Hiya, neighbor!'
'Hi – Zac,' you dirty sex animal, what are you doing here. You smell like sweat. And other bodily fluids I do not wish to proceed naming. It's fucking gross. What the fuck do you think you're doing, soiling my pure-like-a-virgin's-lady-parts abode with your filthy sex body. 'what can I do for you?'

I force my mouth to resemble a hospitable smile I'm sure looks more like a serial killer's grimace.

'Do you happen to have a screwdriver, one of those real big ones?'

Are. You. Fucking. Kidding me.

'You have very loud sex.' I immediately cover my mouth with my hand, which is an odd gesture when you think of it, seeing as HE was the person squealing like a pig in labor, and I am technically the victim here. This slip of the tongue will probably lead to my good pal Zac from this day on referring to me as 'that maladjusted woman without regard for standards and values'. I cringe as I think of my inevitable future of moving to an even bigger city with even more people having tons of sex all around me and me dumping my good friend Mr. C. Sauvignon and starting a life-long, very sexless friendship with Mr. C. Meth.

'Hey, are you okay?' Zac looks genuinely worried, and I realize I got lost in one of my apocalyptic fantasies again, where a meteor is heading for planet Earth and I am trapped in the perpetual singledom that even the wrath of impending doom can't cure.

'Yeah, uh – yeah I- I'm fine.'

'Listen, this is kind of awkward but me and Sally – we started dating a while back and now we've come to, you know, uhm let's call it "consummating the relationship". What I'm saying is it's all still really new and stuff but I understand it's a bit of a nuisance. We'll try and keep it down but I can't make any promises.' Zac goes on laughing uncomfortably for a while before he continues.

'Anyway, I recently bought one of those IKEA bookcases, but the size screwdriver I need to put it together is naturally the only one I don't own. I can ask the janitor but I'm pretty sure I saw a Nazi flag in his office the other day, so I'd rather not, you see.'

I give Zac the screwdriver and close the door as he smiles politely and says thanks.

That evening I put on my headphones and listen to some mind-numbing psychedelic music in a pathetic attempt to shut out the sounds of Zac and Sally doing it for the millionth time. I lost count about six orgasms ago, but I'm pretty sure Zac's to-do list for that day consisted of an IKEA manual and a Kama Sutra book.

I search the web for industrial ear plugs, come to my senses right before checkout and close the browser. I try to re-watch the first episode of Game of Thrones and turn off my television at the first sign of nudity, which is quick. I sit in my room in silence for a short while pondering life and where I went wrong, when there's a knocking at my door for the second time that day. I see it's Sam, the upstairs neighbor. When I first saw him, the day he was moving in, he was carrying boxes full of books and wearing a Pixies T-shirt, needless to say I fell hopelessly in love with him. I check myself in the mirror, fix my hair as best as I can and open the door.

'Jeez, is that Zac? My god, it sounds like two stray cats in distress.'

I laugh and let him in.

That night we watch and comment on a talent show called something like So You Think You Wanna Be America's Next Top Pop Talent On Ice, smoke too many cigarettes and finish two bottles of Merlot. We bang on the walls and scream "STOP HAVING SEX YOU CRAZY BASTARDS" and dance to Heaven 17 to upset the janitor. We fall asleep listening to Keith Jarrett and wake up hung over, confused, and fully clothed. All is quiet as Sam tells me we're having dinner that night, kisses me on the forehead and goes home. I smile as I reconsider my lost faith in humanity. Zac likes Sally, Sally likes Zac, and because of this they have lots and lots of sex. I like Sam, and if he likes me back, we will do the exact same thing. Such is the nature of all animals. **WB**

TO THE EDGE OF THE DESERT FACTION

TEXT THIRZA OSTERHAUS & NADIA DE VRIES DRAWINGS DAAN SPANJAARDT

"To the Edge of the Desert" is a combination of graphic journalism and fiction. Thirza interviewed a refugee from Kenya and wrote an article about his life. Daan, an art academy student, made illustrations of the most striking parts of the refugee's life to accompany the story. Finally, Thirza and Nadia combined their skills to turn nonfiction into fiction, resulting in the story you are reading right now.

The Ethiopian Civil War started on September 12, 1974. The communist army Derg overthrew the government by a coup d'état. In 1977, Ethiopian colonel and dictator Mengistu Haile Mariam started as an officer of the Derg. He embraced Marxism and founded the Marxist-Leninist Worker's Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1984. In 1987, Mengistu became president and adopted a new constitution. He got both executive and legislative power. When protests against the communist regime started in the late 1980s,



Mengistu gave his soldiers and citizens "freedom of action" to root out opponents. Thousands of people were executed and imprisoned without a trial. Citizens were given arms so that they could help him fight the opponents. Thousands of men, women and children died in the following years. During the battle of Afabet in 1989, the Eritrean People's Liberation Front weakened the go-

vernment's army. People outside the Liberation Front also demonstrated for peace, but without using violence. Despite their efforts, the war was not over yet and more innocent people died. Eventually Mengistu was charged for genocide in 2006 by the Ethiopian government. He was accused of killing 2.000 people, among which were many students and politicians.



I.

We have been walking for six hours. Sweat gushes from my forehead, my nose, my chin, and with each breath I taste the salt on my lips. I am thirsty, tired, and hungry, but I don't want to stop walking. There is simply too much at stake. The year is 1989, and I am on my way to the Kenyan border. To freedom. They say a wise traveller never travels alone, and I am no exception. Four hundred men and women trail behind me and my college nickname comes to mind. *Melisizwe*. Leader of the nation. Until last Friday, this name meant something different to me. I was the student representative, captain of the debate team. A straight-A student. I was destined to

become somebody important. But the government ordered my university to be burned to the ground and now my future plans are about as tangible as the sun beating down my back.

It is almost three o'clock and the sun is not simply searing – it's vicious. The air is so dense with heat that I feel drugged. All around me, the refugees are sauntering on like occult creatures. Undead. The border is nowhere in sight yet and the sand collects between my toes like infernal powder. Sometimes my eyes wander off the path and I could swear I see a lizard or scorpion scuttle under a rock. We have no water to quench our thirst. No blankets, either,

to protect our bodies in the night, and the occasional glimpse of a scorpion grows more ominous at each sighting.

Two weeks ago, none of us would have pictured us here. We had scholarships, linen pillowcases, microwaves, friends – all of them still alive. But we have nothing left now and yet we move on.

I think of the cooled bottles of mineral water in my dorm room fridge. The bag of juicy oranges on my desk. In my head, I see myself sucking on the rinds of them, *all* of them, one by one. I can almost taste their juices through the sweat on my lips, though I know I won't be eating any oranges for a long time.

II.

I am sitting on the floor of a large, green tent. In my lap, there's a tin plate filled with boiled vegetables and rice. Three days ago, my travel companions and I arrived at this refugee camp at the Kenyan border, and life seems remarkably better than a few days ago.

Only it isn't.

I share the tent with fifteen other people. I do not know any of them – as a matter of fact, most of them did not even arrive at the border with me on Sunday. The people I share the tent with all come from different towns and even countries, and not all of them speak English.

The language difference, however, is not the main problem.

Each day so far, there have been at least one or two refugees in the camp who completely lose their minds. These instances are not just temporary lapses in mental control, mind you – the refugees pull a knife from their pocket and slit the throat of the nearest person around. If there are no guards ne-

III.

I am on the run again. Around 3 AM there were shots coming from a nearby tent, and I realized I could not take it anymore. Without paying any thought to what I was doing, I got on my feet and darted between the two guard posts to the north of

Then I remember something. There was something *else* on my desk, something more important than a bag of oranges could ever be: an unsent letter to my mother. I was going to take it to the post office after class on Friday, but I never got around to doing it because of the riots.

Suddenly, a voice cries out something from behind me, but I am both too lost in thought and too tired to make sense of what it is. A few seconds later the cry is repeated, and the words I discern fill my heart with hope.

'It's the border! Over there!'

arby, the refugees will sometimes succeed in killing four people before a guard shoots them. When a hysterical refugee does not happen to carry a knife, they resort to cracking someone's neck with their foot sole.

Even though the people in my tent are mostly kind, I am very afraid that one of them will lose their mind at night and kill me in my sleep. As a result, I have not slept since my first night at the camp and I sense my own mental state deteriorating.

I miss my family terribly. I had so badly wanted my mother to know that I had started a peace movement at college. Why had I not put that letter in the mail before I left for class? Mom would have known what I had in mind, and she would have been proud of me. Now I might never be able to tell her again. At night, I sit outside my tent and watch the stars hanging above the refugee camp. I think of my parents, my sister, my dead friends, and feel lonelier than I ever felt before.

my tent. I left the refugee camp with nothing but my clothes and a woollen blanket to shield me from the cold of the desert night.

Though the freezing wind is whipping against my bare shins and I hear the flapping of vulture's wings,

I am not afraid. I know exactly where I need to go. On my first day at the refugee camp, I heard a group of Kenyan couriers discuss a Red Cross base somewhere near the camp. These couriers transported food rations from the base to the camp, and since my arrival I have seen them at the camp every day. This means the base could not be far off.

I am not simply walking – I am running. I can feel my lungs contracting as they suck in the air as far up as the front of my throat, but I am determined to get to the base by morning.

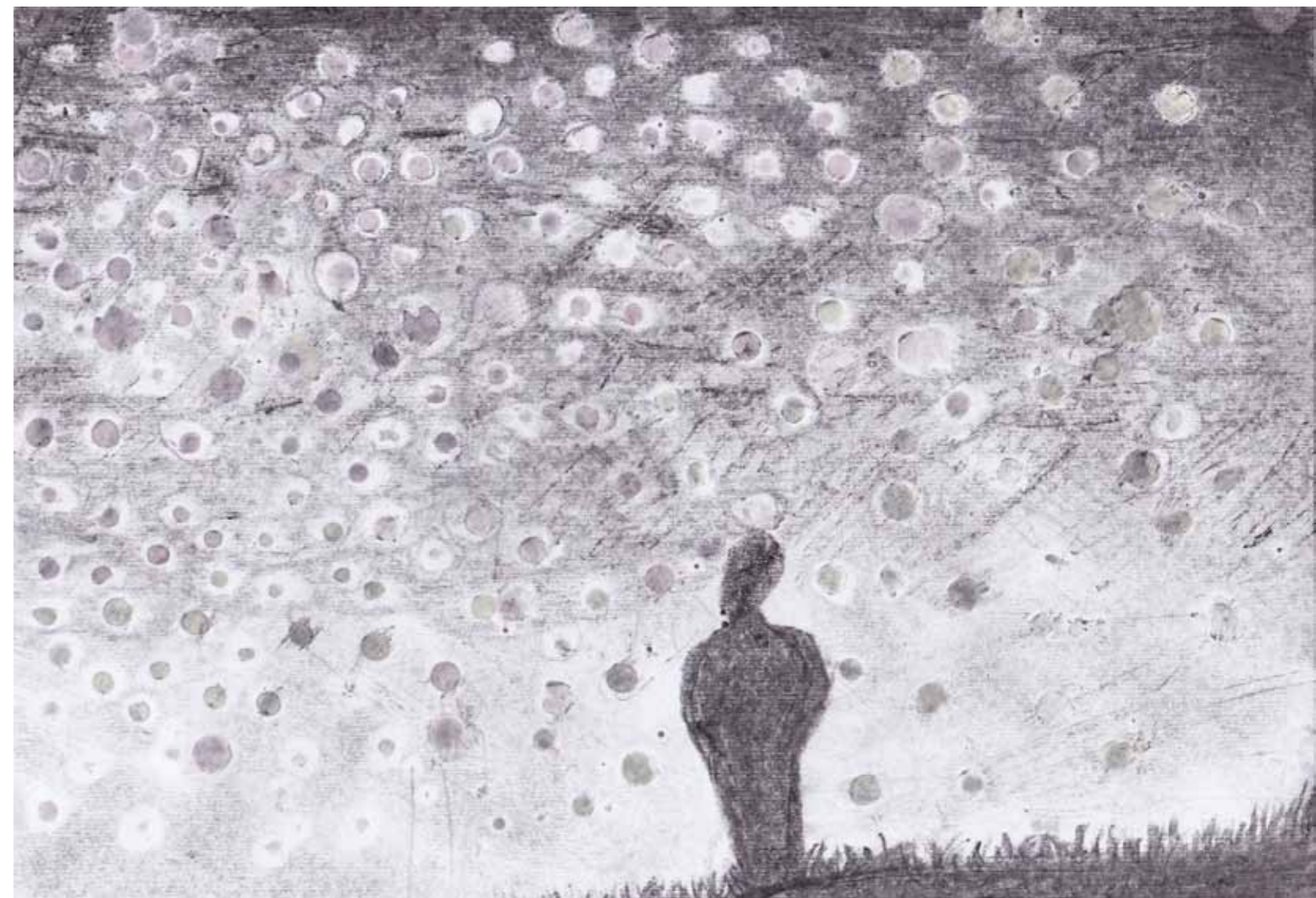
I will never let those lunatics kill me. I will survive this terror.

I lift my head and see the stars are still there where my eyes left them, high above in the desert sky. I am the only person traversing this part of the desert, and in the solitude it feels as if the stars are shining there, twinkling coyly, only for my entertainment. I think of my mother again, and I smile – we might see each other again after all.

'I will survive this terror', I say to myself. 'I am Melisizwe, the leader of the nation. I will bring peace to my shattered country.'

With my heart thumping against my ribs, I run on until the sky turns pink and announces the coming of morning. **WB**

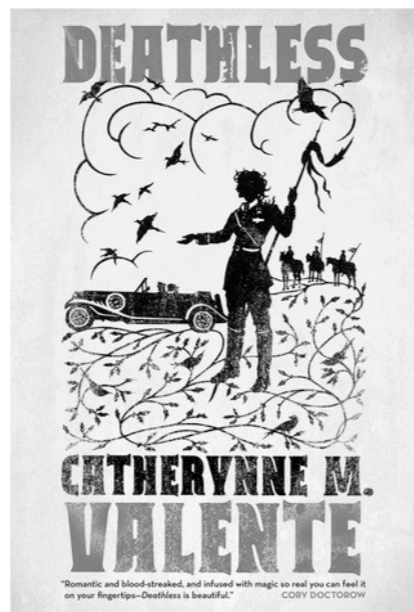
Based on a true story



Marya Morevna has lived all her life in St. Petersburg until she is visited by Koschei, the Tsar of Life. He takes her away to his empire, Buyan, where Marya lives with him through love and war. When Marya returns to what is now Leningrad, she ultimately has to face the consequences of her decision. This is an incomplete and perhaps bewildering summary of a book that might at first appear quite as bewildering because of the many elements it contains. *Deathless* intertwines fairy tales and myths with the bureaucracy of Stalinist Russia and the disastrous winters during the Siege of Leningrad.

Catherynne M. Valente, a prolific writer of many genres, is extremely well-versed in Russian folklore and fairytales. She plays with the predictable structure of fairy tales – and thwarts your expectations – but also places the fairy tale creatures in a historical context. The domoviye, for example, have formed a collective and all call each other “comrade”. When they do not agree with something, they “will make a report! [They] will file *paperwork*! [They] will make a *formal report*!” Even those things that seem inevitably connected with tradition and the past, then, become part of the new communist Russia.

If you don’t know what the “domoviye” in the preceding paragraph are, Valente will not help you out. When a Russian word captures a concept better than an English one ever could, she will use the former and she won’t translate it to make it any easier for the spoiled reader. The same goes for the historical context – much of the humour in the novel is only understood with quite some knowledge of Russian history. Having said that, much can be grasped from the context and the absence of explanations never becomes discouraging, but only invite you to go out and learn more yourself. (Domoviye are house spirits, by the way.)



Deathless
Catherynne M. Valente
Corsair
352 p.
ISBN: 9781472108685

At the heart of this complex tale we find Marya Morevna, a character who develops beautifully from a young girl without a will of her own – literally – to a woman who dares to turn the tables on Koschei. In the process, the character of Koschei himself remains rather elusive, though. This fits his role as the mythical Tsar of Life, but it also makes it difficult to understand why exactly Marya loves him. A more interesting character, perhaps, is that of Baba Yaga. She is another archetype of Slavic folklore, who tells Marya that “a wife must terrify” and sends her off on a quest to prove that she has the abilities to terrify her husband. The scene where Marya imitates Baba Yaga – in a thick, black fur with duck bones in its pockets – belongs to the most memorable in the book.

Finally, there is the lush language, which sometimes borders on the kitschy, but hardly – if ever – crosses the line (and words are *never* minced) and all the other themes Valente manages to cram in this 350 pages novel. Who goes into *Deathless* expecting an easy, relaxing read will be disappointed. You have to keep your head in the game: this novel is larger on the inside. **WB**

The summer had been rather taxing for Margaret Tench. She’d lost count of the number of al fresco lunches she simply *had* to attend. These were invariably depressing affairs, where disingenuous superlatives filled the perfumed air with irritating regularity. Margaret hated that: the glib assumption that everything was fine. Maybe her friends *were* fine, but why did they always assume that she was? Her indignation was usually tempered by the thought that she’d never given them any reason to assume otherwise. She’d learnt to mirror their content expressions so expertly that she no longer knew she was doing it.

It had been nearly a year since the divorce, and six months since she’d resolved to ingratiate herself with a new group of people, but that hadn’t happened. After all, how could she abandon them when they were so familiar? Once these quasi-feminists had celebrated her as a paragon of womanhood – they’d gleefully empathised with her and made no secret of what they’d do in her position. Even the ones who couldn’t mask their boredom on the phone were always reassuringly supportive in the flesh. Single, and cashing in on her emancipation, she was in charge of her destiny, but every envious eulogy to her seemed to proclaim exactly what her destiny should be.

As the weight of expectation grew, she’d actually convinced herself that their professed ideals of frivolity and promiscuity were good, honourable things. Spending money had been easy enough, but the fabled bachelors had been slow to respond to her. She’d been so relieved when the first man – a dentist called Douglas – had agreed to go out with her that she’d spent almost the entire date planning exactly how she’d tell the ladies about him. Before dessert she’d already composed a long list of sentences, each carefully engineered to inspire even greater envy, and each carefully avoiding the fact that she’d met him in his professional capacity. She’d imagined herself holding court before

her captive audience, casually extolling his virtues: He’s a quite brilliant dentist, she’d say, before going on to talk about how steady his hands were and delighting in the insinuation. He *does* eat rather loudly, but one has to tolerate such things.

The reality was different, not least because the quite brilliant dentist didn’t want to go on another date. She’d been ‘too distant’, apparently, and she was swift to incorporate that observation into her own critique of him. He went from being ‘brilliant’ to ‘boring’, ‘attentive’ to ‘absent minded’ and ‘important’ to ‘impotent’ in her scathing testimony. Any suggestion that she’d been hurt by his rejection was dispelled by frequent, self-conscious flashes of her newly whitened smile. She’d been glad to have recourse to that grin on numerous occasions since, but over time the ladies had become more reluctant to respond in kind. Anthony the ‘obviously homosexual’ hairdresser and Claude the ‘pretentious’ interior designer were treated with similar disdain, but by the sixth man they were already beginning to talk about how lovely it would be to settle down again. Now their platitudes were uttered with faintly sarcastic inflections, as if she’d become an object of pity: a uniquely desperate, pathetic individual. Still, without these friends she had no-one.

A shapeless mass of floral fabric bellowed within her peripheral vision. ‘Maggie darling!’ ‘Oh, hi.’ Margaret couldn’t remember the woman’s name, and didn’t care to either. She hated being called Maggie, and was fairly sure the lady knew it. ‘So,’ the lady said, stirring her drink with a tiny umbrella as she tried to look over the top of her sunglasses, ‘how’s the banker?’ ‘Oh, he’s fine,’ Margaret said, sipping her wine thoughtfully.

The banker was the seventh, and as far as the ladies were concerned, the latest love interest. Margaret hadn’t told them that she’d stopped seeing him after their second date. On that occasion

she'd helped him get drunk, only to have a crystal whisky tumbler thrown at her for her trouble. He'd kicked over her jardinière stand too, and she was fairly certain that he'd actually stolen the small bronze statue she vaguely recalled standing next to the telephone. It wasn't until the second date that she realised there had been something odd about him (she was trying desperately to remember his name now) since the beginning, but even so it had taken one premature ejaculation on his part and countless G&Ts before she'd felt able to voice her concerns, and that's when he'd thrown the glass at her. The grandfather clock still stood testament to his poor aim.

The woman hummed unmusically in response. She was helping herself to tiny portions from the colourful buffet.

'What about you?' Margaret asked. 'How's your other half?' She smiled as she said it, picturing the neurotic, nameless man.

'Working hard.' The woman recoiled from her plate and prodded a sorry looking piece of potato fastidiously with a silver fork. 'My goodness,' she said. 'This potato salad is simply *awful*.' She announced her opinion as if she were being dangerously subversive.

'I made it,' Margaret said, still smiling.

'Ha!' the lady cried, throwing back her head dramatically. 'I *am* sorry, darling!' She nibbled a corner off the sad nugget and chewed it slowly. The flabby contours of her face softened a wince. 'Maybe it's not awful, exactly,' she said, dabbing her lips; 'it's just not as *balanced* as it usually is - you know, in flavour. Normally your potato salad is sublime!'

Sublime potato salad. Margaret briefly contemplated asking if she was serious. 'I haven't eaten any,' she said, taking a long sip of rosé. 'It goes straight to the hips.'

The lady coughed and dabbed her mouth again. 'Well, my husband prefers a fuller figure.'

Laughing came as a great relief to Margaret: her smile had become too painful to hold any longer. She hadn't even considered whether it was appropriate to laugh or not, but sure enough the obnoxious woman was laughing too, waving at her diminutively as she trotted away.

Reassured that her powers of perception were still intact, she turned back to the table. Very deliberately she picked up the bowl of potato salad; very deliberately she emptied it into the flowerbed. Then she refilled her glass and proposed a toast to no-one, smiling at how the sickly wine distorted the figures of the other women. **WB**

As the hours race past me
A wave of flowing sound and
Motion
Time has stopped yet
I keep moving
Forever trapped in my prison
Of stars, planets, galaxies
Things more grand than
Most minds could fathom
Yet I can never stop the
Waterfalls, flowing out of their
Wells, the buckets forever
Replenished
I know not how
I am unable to care
It does not matter
Matter... matter... antimatter.
All so... simple. Common. Known.
You cannot see Pain.
Cannot touch Hatred.
Cannot smell Envy.
Cannot wrap yourself in Love
And hide yourself
From the world in it
My blanket will shield me
Against the darkness of the
Void.
All devouring
But if I just think
Little thoughts
Maybe I'll be too small
To notice.

A DAY IN THE LIFE: AT THE OFFICE SHORT STORY

TEXT ANNELIES MARTENS

My fingers were flying across the black keyboard. Letters formed a fat centipede scurrying over the screen, followed by thinner ones, separated by two hits of the enter key. Piles of paper inhabited my desk, waiting to be picked up and put in the archive, which would be their resting place for the next 15 years, before being cut into a thousand pieces by the rattling teeth of a ruthless shredder. Yellow tulips hung their heads over the edge of a glass vase that stood on a small round table in the corner of the room. They matched perfectly with the sun coloured walls and the light grey carpeted floor. The long wall across my desk was dominated by a large cabinet, which held all the history and secrets of the company, only to be unlocked by a key in my desk drawer. Tangible memories of my travels smiled at me from the windowsill; a furry panda from China stood side by side with a little babushka from Prague, and the Statue of Liberty proudly showed its torch to a Vietnamese red wooden fish. They were all lined up as if they were about to mount the double decker bus that stood in the corner of the sill and looked redder than red in the ray of light peeping through the blinds.

A hand opened my office door and quickly closed it again. The rhythm of the keys seized, and the centipede stopped running. Wild eyes looked into mine.

‘You just have to hear this!’

Before I had the chance to enquire after the reason of this rude intrusion of my workflow, a badly lipsticked mouth started whispering

at me conspiratorially. The words penetrated my left ear and swiftly found the exit of my right. The grey machine in between was frantically busy trying to process the 200 pounds sitting on my desk. On the assembly line were two dangling fishnets with 5 inch heels at the end, sticking from a piece of cloth that barely did its job covering the saddlebags underneath. Hanging over the cloth were three sausages on top of each other, with a pale black lace coating showing hints of the soft soggy substance. The two mountains of wrinkled flesh that followed looked like old featherless chickens choking in boiling water, desperate to jump out of the fuming pan.

When the overly tanned jaws finally stopped going up and down, I bent over and whispered, ‘It’s a scandal, a downright scandal.’

The wild eyes still looked at me, blond and grey curls danced fiercely up and down and the badly lipsticked mouth said: ‘Isn’t it? Who would ever have thought that of her? With her sheep-like eyes. She’s a wolf, I tell you, a dangerous wolf. Better be careful!’

My head nodded in quasi agreement. My fingers positioned themselves on the keyboard, and my eyes spoke a farewell message at their wild counterparts. Finally, the hand opened my office door again, and the fishnets walked out. And while the wild eyes sought mine for a last confirmation of understanding through the glass, the centipede continued on its path over the screen. **WB**

ON THE DIRE EVIL THAT IS BEDS

COLUMN

TEXT PAUL HOFMA

I’m certainly not the last person to admit to having trouble getting out of bed early. Indeed, getting out of bed before eight is very much on my list of “Things I would really prefer to never do”, right below “Eating molted bread and finding out after you’ve already put it in your mouth” and right above “Fighting an enormous three-headed guardian of the underworld (which also happens to be a dog) using nothing but a piece of string, a stick, and a goldfish”. Still better than spiders though.

Regardless, this is not a story about Cerberus or about spiders (luckily). This is a story about beds and the evil of such things. “Evil?” you might ask. And I would reply: “Yes, very evil indeed.” And I bet that you, dear reader, have an idea why. No? Let me elaborate.

You see, once upon a time, mankind was perfectly content living in caves, sleeping on whatever we could find. Very content with the exception of the local idiot who had a tendency to get eaten by dinosaurs, but I digress. These dear cavemen had no trouble getting out of bed whatsoever; they were probably glad they finally had an excuse to cease their lying down on the cold hard ground. I’ve never been too fond of sleeping on floors myself, so I can only imagine the general grumpiness at the unkindness of the cave floors, and the delightful freedom of being allowed to walk around for a bit again and maybe skin a rabbit or two. As such, the dreadful phenomenon of MONDAIS (Mortifying Ordeal of Non-negotiable Dreadful Awakenings – Irritability: Severe) simply did not exist.

Then one day, a shaman threw out his back because of his poor sleep and the pain was so unbearable he decided to make a deal with the devil. He sent him a very polite letter: “Dear devil, I know you don’t exist, but please, I need something comfy to sleep on. Love, Shaman.” A few days later a fiery letter was delivered by the mail-o-saurus, which the shaman happily accepted. This unfortunately caught him on fire, which didn’t end well. Remember: don’t set old people on fire. Generally a bad idea.

The rest of the tribe went to see what the ruckus was about. They found the burning letter, which simply read: “Yo dog, Devil here. Heard you had trouble sleeping. Try this.” On the fiery hellish backside of the letter was a picture of a comfy double bed. And lo and behold, the tradition of sleeping utensils was born.

However, these comfy beds were born of the Devi’s vile will! Now, people would never solve world hunger, because they would never be able to get out of bed on time. Oh, humanity! Which, appropriately enough, didn’t really care because beds are still a whole lot better than sleeping on the ground.

So, if you ever have problems getting out of bed again, just remember: OH MY GOD, MY BED IS EVIL AND IT’S GONNA KILL ME! If that doesn’t help, there’s a snooze function on your alarm. Really. **WB**

STEVE SMITH'S BOOKCASE INTERVIEW

TEXT RUBY DE VOS PHOTOGRAPHY INES SEVERINO

Could you tell us something about your favourite books?

I think that the best fiction book ever written is *Middlemarch* by George Eliot. I think that if you've read that, you don't need to read any other work of fiction anymore (laughs). It deals very simply and subtly with a number of relationships over a period of years. The language is wonderful – Eliot puts words together so beautifully that you are engaged on the level of sounds and alliteration as well. It is so understated all the way through. When I went to Leeds University, I stayed in a dormitory in an old building, built about two hundred years ago. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot writes a description of a northern town seen from the window in an old house. We worked out that that window was actually the window of the room I lived in for a year! The view, of course, has changed completely, but I thought: "My god, she actually wrote this description looking out of this window and this is the room I'm living in." *Middlemarch* actually has had a bad effect on me because now I am very intolerant of and impatient with fiction. All my fiction reading is actually done in the bookshop. I'll go into a bookshop with ten minutes to spare, pick out something and start reading it, and I'm usually bored by the end of the first page. And there is the question: do I have the time to read a second page, or a third, or should I go off and do something else? And this sounds very negative, but I've read other people who said the same thing: why should you persist with something if you are not engaged immediately?

If you don't read fiction, what do you read?

Biographies! They are fiction enough for me. They are mostly historic. Somebody had to research the character but then the writer has to interpret the information they get, they need to get inside the character for this. And suddenly

that becomes a great form of fiction. Some biographers are just brilliant writers; they'll make very subtle connections between things. You'll find yourself thinking: did the people themselves understand this is why they did something?

What are some of your favourite biographies?

I adore Furbank's biography of E.M. Forster, just because I enjoy that particular period in English history. And I find Forster such an interesting man, such a strange man. Very clever and quiet, a very quiet writer. Furbank gives a great description and understanding of Forster's context. He works out why he did not become more of a public figure, what was holding him back. I also like Richard Ellman's biography on Oscar Wilde. It's very cleverly written and includes some very comic lines which he uses to conclude chapters – the biography is quite dramatic and theatrical in its own sense.

Any other non-fiction that you enjoy reading?

At university I did English and History, so I'm also very keen on researching the background of writers and playwrights. Where did they come from, what were their circumstances, who did they know? So I enjoy reading about that as well. And finally the on-going saga's of reading about directors directing and actors acting, which is all very interesting to me: how people get involved in the process of making a play and what decisions they make at various points.

You taught Shakespeare last year and you are teaching Oscar Wilde right now. What are your favourite works by them?

From Wilde I like *Lady Windermere's Fan*. That was his first successful play. He'd written three or four before that which were disastrous – they were melodramatic and rather biblical. But *Lady Windermere's Fan* is great. I like the simplicity of



the story. When it starts, the wife is good and the husband is a bit iffy but at the end of the play they are both changed. There is a complete reversal of understanding of what's good and what's bad. And Oscar's witty epigrams are very good to listen to. They are like eating sweets all the way through a film – they give you something pleasurable to look forward to. Also, some of his short stories are just simply beautiful – *The Selfish Giant*, for example: you'll read that and you'll cry, every time. As for Shakespeare, I kind of grew up with *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. When I was at school I used to study those plays all the time and I think I could just sit down and repeat the entire text, of both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, without interruption. But I also feel that I like *Twelfth Night* more and more, because I do think it's really funny with all the gender-bending that goes on. The comedies are quite challenging and interesting to see.

Do you buy a lot of books?

No! I tend not to buy books because I've got

nowhere to put them anymore. And I can't really part with them, it's really hard to get rid of books. I like having lots of books. I still have all the books I studied at school and university.

Could you describe your bookshelves?

Very dusty. They're very messy, there's no organisation – there's no colour scheme going on or alphabetical categorisation. I think there is an art section, and I know there is a theatre section. There are also biography and history shelves and cupboards, but they're not very well organised. And mostly they come with cuddly toys or bits of glass or photographs. But I am quite good at remembering – if I put a book somewhere and I want to find it three years later, I actually do remember where I put it. I can see in my mind where I put these books. I mean I have thousands and thousands of books, but I *can* remember the last time I used a particular book. Luckily! **WB**

BOBBY FIELDS SHORT STORY

TEXT JOCHEM BLOM

Robert Franklin Fields, who was known to his friends as Bobby or sometimes Bob, had at one point in his life been a rather inquisitive little boy. However, technological advances, hormonal changes and a certain disposition for exceptionally lazy behavior had turned Bobby into a corpulent, lazy child, who was disinterested in the world and the many intricate secrets and mysteries it had to offer.

On one particular Monday afternoon, Bobby had an important exam of which the result would determine whether or not he would have to repeat the 9th grade. Bobby, however, cared more for video games and television shows that numbed his mind rather than gaining an edu-

cation and preparing himself for the possible future. He had therefore decided not to study at all. He figured there would eventually be an opportunity to take the test again, and, on this particular afternoon, playing video games suited him much better than studying.

Despite his laziness, Bobby didn't want to disappoint his parents--which is why he decided to ride his bike over to the classroom where the exam would be held, sign his name on a piece of paper and then go to the nearest cafeteria to get himself some fries and a milkshake. As long as he arrived home after 6 p.m. his parents would think that he'd done his best. Had Bobby been any more interested in the world that surroun-

ded him, he would have noticed that the flowers in his garden were particularly beautiful that afternoon, as the roses and daffodils and daisies were in full bloom. All Bobby noticed of this as he walked through the garden towards the shed where he kept the bike, was a sweet scent that hung in the air and clung itself to Bobby's nose, almost as if trying to greet him. The only effect it had on Bobby was making him slightly more hungry for the sweet taste of the milkshake he was planning on drinking.

Bobby took out his bike, said goodbye to his mother and father and rode over to the busy intersection he had to cross in order to get to his school. A part of him refused to believe that something bad could ever happen to him. He was, after all, the main character of his own life. Sometimes, however, even main characters have bad days. It just so happened that the traffic light, which would usually prevent Bobby from getting into harm's way, had not been functioning properly that afternoon, which is why he decided to just go on straight ahead without paying attention to the traffic that surrounded him.

Several cars came speeding towards Bobby and, as if in slow motion, Bobby hit his brakes and was slowly hurtling towards the ground. In less than a second, his life, his sad excuse of a life, would be over. Bobby was not prepared for this; he was not ready. There was so much he still wanted to do. So much he still wanted to experience. And there it was, his doom, his death, in the form of a truck driven by an elderly man wearing a *Coca-Cola* cap. Bobby thought it strange he noticed that, as he figured there would not be enough time to focus on something so trivial. That is when something utterly peculiar happened. Bobby hit the ground, scraping his knees and hands, but the cars that had appeared so close to him still seemed as far away as they had been moments ago. The cars nearing Bobby still seemed to be moving at an

incredibly slow pace, while Bobby was moving at regular speed. Every car on the road seemed to move incredibly slowly and so did everyone on the sidewalk. The first thing Bobby thought as he tried to comprehend the situation, was that he had to get off of the road, so he ran over to the sidewalk and sat down on a bench by some grass. A loud, deep sound could be heard throughout the neighborhood. Bobby didn't know what the sound was, but found it strangely beautiful, like the song of a whale. He sat on the bench for a while, partially in shock, listening to the sound and looking at his surroundings. The last few years he hadn't been one for intelligent independent thought, but somehow he couldn't help but think that maybe, somehow, he had been given a second chance.

After about an hour of watching the world around him, Bobby decided to go for a walk. He didn't quite understand what was going on, or why it was possible for him to walk around as fast as he normally could while the rest of the world was moving so slowly, but he didn't care. Instead, he seemed far more interested in the world around him. He had walked around for some time, when he noticed some squirrels were enjoying some food on the greenest grass he'd ever seen. They looked incredibly peaceful and tranquil, like a painting. Their tails were brown and fuzzy, which he remembered meant something. Did they serve a certain purpose? He couldn't remember. He vowed to look it up later in an encyclopedia. As he continued on his walk, he noticed a rainbow in the sky and remembered reading something interesting about the different colors. Were all possible colors hidden in the rainbow? He couldn't remember. That, too, he'd look up. Then he saw a bunch of girls playing with a Rubik's cube. He'd gotten one when he was a child, from his grandfather, but it was around the time he'd stopped caring about puzzles and other intelligent games and he'd started playing video games. He still had it somewhere, he was sure of it.

Although Bobby wasn't sure what time it was, as his watch had continued to run according to normal speed, he figured it was probably time to go to school, to see if he could maybe still finish the exam. He hadn't studied for it, but maybe it would be about things he'd know, or perhaps he could study at school until time would flow regularly again. Perhaps he could even figure out WHY time was acting so strangely. He remembered there being books about time in his school's library. Maybe he should stop by the library and pick up some books! School seemed awfully far away to walk though, and seeing as his bike was still lying there, in the middle of

the road, he figured he could just get his bike and ride over to school.

He was glad to have undergone such a significant change in such a short time and knew that from now on, life would be different. As he picked up his bike, however, he noticed that the beautiful sound that he had heard earlier, that sounded like a singing whale, sped up and became a car horn, and Bobby Fields was hit by a truck. **WB**

WB

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FACEBOOK.COM/SVETCETERA

Elysium, the latest production by South-African émigré whiz kid Neill Blomkamp, does not quite live up to our expectations. His film starts off strong with establishing shots of the ghettoized neighborhoods of Los Angeles in which an ex-con named Max (Matt Damon) is struggling to be a good boy and survive the drudgery of his job at a local factory. This turns out to be quite the challenge when he receives a lethal dose of radiation in a work-related incident and is handed some painkillers to keep him 'functioning' until his impending death, expected in just 5 days. Thrown into the mix is Frey (Alice Braga), a full-time nurse whose daughter is in the final stages of leukemia and who desperately needs medical attention. To find a cure for their problems, Max and Frey decide to go up to Elysium, the utopian space torus in which the ultra-rich have made a heaven for themselves. Conveniently, Elysium's inhabitants have a machine that identifies and instantly cures any illness, granting eternal life to its inhabitants. To reach the space station, which is off-limits to the working class poor on earth, they enlist the help of Spider (Wagner Moura), a human trafficker who sends shuttles with refugees across space to the station. So far so good. Another neat parable that transfers political issues to a sci-fi setting, like Blomkamp did in *District 9*. But it gets better.

To augment Max's shattered body, an exoskeleton is fitted to his skin and brain, and this leads to some of the best action scenes I have seen in a while. Blomkamp's visual style deals a hefty punch through a combination of appropriate shaky cam, flawless CGI, and stunning slow-motion sequences. But honestly, there is nothing better than watching Damon's buffed and mechanically enhanced body punch it out with high-tech security bots.

The rest of the story, however, falls short. Its political allegory, which addresses contemporary problems related to immigration and access to health



care, is quirky at best. Different languages, for example, are abused to 'clarify' political divisions; Spanish is presented as the language of immigration and resistance, French, spoken on Elysium, is the language of the oppressor, and Afrikaans is posited as the language of violence and hatred. In addition to these smaller problems, *Elysium* fails to provide an ending that resolves these political issues. In *District 9*, Blomkamp quite successfully dramatized the implications of apartheid by focusing on a group of aliens that seek refuge in Johannesburg, and one feels that he wants to do something similar in *Elysium*. Yet the sheer scale of this political theme overwhelms the straightforward narrative structure of the film. This leads to serious plot holes, such as Spider's unquestioned role in ferrying immigrants to Elysium—a treacherous journey in which few survive. In Blomkamp's simplified world, Spider is presented unambiguously as a resistance leader who leads a heroic fight against the ruthless capitalists on the space station. Would we see the drug lords in Mexico in a similar light? As heroes who accept hard cash to 'guide' immigrants across miles of desert where they are likely to die or face the grim prospect of being deported back across the border? I think not. All in all, *Elysium* gets a passing grade. Try not to think too much while watching *Elysium*; it is much better that way. **WB**



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De Facultaire Studentenraad Geesteswetenschappen is het medezeggenschapsorgaan voor de studenten op onze faculteit, bestaande uit 12 studenten. Dit betekent dat wij ons dit jaar gaan inzetten voor jullie. Daarnaast oefenen wij namens alle studenten controle uit op het faculteitsbestuur.

Jullie zijn altijd welkom in **kamer 3.02** van het P.C. Hoofthuis. Kom gerust eens langs! We zijn ook te bereiken per e-mail: fsr-fgw@uva.nl

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So many books, so little time. - Frank Zappa Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read. - Groucho Marx Memory believes before knowing remembers. - William Faulkner Think before you speak. Read before you think. - Fran Lebowitz We read to know that we are not alone. - William Nicholson The best books... are those that tell you what you know already. - George Orwell I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells. Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living. - Dr Seuss Never trust anyone who has not brought a book with them. - Lemony Snickett

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