My brother’s gardens

Hans Op de Beeck

The churchyard is immense. An oppressive heat hangs over it; the sky is overcast and appears to be patiently loading up for a devastating outburst. Our small family stands mournful and sweating at the edge of the hole into which four men dressed in black have gently lowered the coffin. The clergyman has said his singsong piece; we have sprinkled the coffin with nerveless hands. Now we turn to each other consolingly, and I put my arm round Koen's waist. He looks down with his characteristic, grumpy expression.
The uniform gravestones divide the grounds in a geometrical pattern that reminds me of my brother's gardens. His body has now been entrusted to a garden that doesn't really suit him.

Still half asleep, I butter the bread. The neon light flickers. The phone rings about ten times. I stand up, jerk open the fridge, take out a bottle of milk and gulp it all down. The window reveals a gray, nondescript September sky, and beneath it the narrow garden edged with concrete slabs. At the end a swing is swinging. I yawn.
As I sweep the breadcrumbs off the table with a stiff hand, my eye is caught by a still life of food and drink clustered near the edge like people herded together. A jar of cooked mussels in milky liquid, a jar of strawberry jam, a green wine bottle, a white bread bag.
This silent company has spent the night on the table. It looks at me. The bread bag is a crumpled chunk, the wine bottle lets its shoulders slump in resignation, the mussels call out something unintelligible, the jam jar doesn't know where to look. I swallow.

I sit at a table in the corner, gesture to the waitress for a coffee, rest my elbows on the formica top and put my head in my hands. I close my eyes for a moment. Suddenly I hear Ellen's voice close by. I am looking straight into her face. She bends forward to pull up a chair with both hands.
How are you, she asks. I lie. I feel slightly guilty that I'm not feeling any pain from being alone.
There is too long a silence. In it a cup of coffee is placed between us. I look at her. I look at her figure. Her figure in space. I fell in love with her because she was big. I like big women. For one reason or another Ellen seems to be small now.
I tried to ring you this morning, she says. She avoids my eyes. She too knows that this is yet another pointless encounter. I look at her hands. They look old. Then I look her in the eye. She stares at me for seconds like an icon clinging to the faithful. All at once tears well from her right eye.

Her face breaks. She looks down and I put a tentative hand on her cheek.

Heat. Wretched heat. My brother has laboriously pulled himself up into the big cane chair on the terrace behind his house – it's about four in the afternoon – and his Bermuda shorts and T-shirt cling to his heavy body. There isn't a breath of air. In this heat every movement is an effort. Why in God's name did he end up here?
When he and Elise came to live here it seemed adventurous. He thought he would get used to the climate. Today he knows that it's all been a mistake. The region is in decline. The village is a dull, conservative dump. The neighbours are friendly, though. His relationship with Elise has deteriorated. One Sunday in the spring she went to church with the pale woman neighbour. My brother felt betrayed.
Since that day it has become clear to him how blind he was to the changes in Elise. It's as if the region has gradually absorbed her and he is now completely alone. Elise is especially close-lipped these days and that is remarkable, to put it mildly. When my brother first introduced me to her, I was startled by how extravert she was. In company her boisterousness compensated for my brother's often embarrassing silence. He wrote that she was knotting big dark tapestries together with a fat Spanish woman. They spread over the whole house like a virus.

How old was I then? Nine? Ten? If I close my eyes, it comes back, like a bit of slow motion film without sound, leisurely and floating. Grandfather at the door of his hospital room, me – stock-still – ten yards away from him. See his fine, bald bird's head? He turns round with an indescribable smile and then his right arm slowly rises and waves to me with groping fingers, the way old people wave to small children. We look into each other's eyes for a few seconds, grandfather's raised arm frozen in the air, my body nailed to the spot. The slowness comes to a halt. There we stand, together, more together, most together. His look stayed on my retina, and his weightless body has already lain down on the bed in a gentle turning movement.
I want to put that floating, that slowness, onto words. Only that. Page after page. The banal chronology with its big and little stories, its intrigues, must be burned. Words must snare what has fallen silent in pure letters. Words must be rescued from the mill of time that's out of control. Let's then freeze them in sentences with a safe full stop.

My head rests against the window. The station glides slowly past under me, and the speed cuts the landscape into horizontal strips. The carriage is empty.
On the train I want to be undisturbed as I dissolve in the chaos of the speed, I want to feel safe being nowhere. Let this train travel endlessly, please, let it refuse every arrival.
I always sit facing the front of the train. I like to see what's ahead of me through the window. Ellen invariably sits with her back to the direction of travel; she turns her back on what lies in store for her. She looks only on what she leaves behind, identifies with her past, wallows in it, slips away in it. She wants to evade the new and unknown.
I need the enthusiasm of the new, the stimulus of naïve hope. Ellen curls up with the hopelessness of the ever-growing amount of what is left behind. So when we used to take the train together, we always sat facing each other. How I loved that arrangement – it was reassuring. Sometimes Ellen came and sat next to me. Then we looked together at what lay ahead and I felt uncomfortable.

It's exactly eight o'clock. With a fine knife my brother patiently cuts shavings from a pencil to give it a long, sharp point. The shavings land neatly in the small cup which, after the sharpening, he carefully places on the side table beside his worktable. Elise has just put a cup of tea on this side table. Now with the same care he unrolls a thin sheet of white paper. At each corner he pushes in a drawing pin – a preparatory action that has become a fixed ritual. Five years ago he lost the use of his legs, at which time he turned to something that at least gave the appearance of being meaningful.
When he and Elise came to live here, they had great plans. The garden, for example. The huge piece of uncultivated land that belonged to the house was to be a splendid garden. In the years before his leg failed him, my brother had occasionally outdone himself by digging up a long strip of ground on a cool day and planting a row of horrible conifers. But they never got as far as what is generally called a garden. Since my brother has lived on wheels, he has concentrated on drawing plans for a superb garden, which is to be laid out by the neighbours.
My brother's paper garden now consists of eight hundred meticulous studies. He sent me some by post. Look, each fragile sheet has been erased and gone over again and again. Have you ever seen anything like it? His daily drawing, always unfinished, has become a complex mental exercise: the garden is his paradigm, his place for thought, and the garden elements are his

metaphorical vocabulary. There he seeks the perfect arrangement, boundaries, unity, form and thought coinciding.

I've now been sitting beside Koen for quite a while and he has not looked at me. As usual, Koen stares ahead without intention, his head inclined slightly downwards. His neck and shoulders are cramped. His fingers protrude from his too long sleeves in an anatomically illogical way. His right arm makes a sudden flapping movement, as if it belongs to someone else. I answer this gesture and produce a box of wet grapes and put it on the table. I see the excitement in Koen's eyes and the corners of his mouth that others cannot see. I know that expression from the days when as a teenager Koen lay on his stomach in the living room and masturbated. At that age he sometimes came home at the weekend and by this means embarrassed visitors. Mother referred to his masturbating as 'Koen's movements'. As growing children we have never thought twice about Koen's behavior. When my brother and I where born he 'was' already there. And so Koen 'has' always 'been' there, self-evidently, a matter of course. We thought of him as a thing, an object that sat, lay or paced back and forth somewhere and demanded too much of mother's attention now and again.
We teased him a lot, too: we mercilessly knocked over the cheese boxes he has laboriously piled up to make wobbly towers, or bit him in the back. Now that I'm sitting here at the table beside Koen and looking at him, I notice for the first time what a handsome man he is: his dark eyes, full eyebrows, smooth ivory skin, straight nose. He is the best looking of the three of us.

I turn my head to the left and see the back of Ellen's head, half of which has disappeared in the pillow. It takes a while before I can explain how and why that terribly familiar head is lying there. She turned up last night with a lame excuse. I let her in for the first time in months and we made love. I've turned the knife in the wound once again and I blame myself for that.
I split up with her nearly three years ago. We were still happy but I felt extremely threatened by that. We were perfectly in harmony. She found in me a mentor, a father; I found in her the mother who was proud of what I did, my seeming perseverance. I found in her the mother who pressed me to her soothing breast and came up with wonderful lies. But my melancholy melted because of her warmth and I was afraid of losing the dept and chaos in my existence. Our life together had become the cultivation of the

everyday, a well-oiled system in which delightfully chaotic experiences were rare.
Without melancholy I would cease to exist. A break was inevitable.

It is early and still bearable outside. My brother sits in the cane chair on the terrace behind his house. A young black dog walks in the loose sand of the uncultivated grounds, as if standing on his feet for the first time.
In the distance a neighbour raises a hand. The landscape is washed out and dusty. Erik longs for a heavy burst of rain that would restore depth and shine to the green.
The dusty climate puts a filter not only over the landscape but also over my brother's world. This membrane has wiped out every contrast and he has let it happen. Now he yearns for a drama, an irreparable drama that will restore depth and shine to his life.
My brother considers how life has always seemed to him. More than I do, and he knows how I like to adopt the stance of a 'spectator', he feels like an outsider in his own life, an extra wandering about in it as if by chance. He has not chosen this spectator's role; it was simply allocated to him. Our being twins is a metaphor for his sense of being a spectator: even as a child he could look at himself in me.
In some way he still feels responsible for his passive role; burning inside him is a sense of guild that he can't put into words. His guilt is building slowly but inevitably to a crescendo. In a letter he told me that he likens himself to a postman who – against his own will – buries the post in his garden every morning, and then gets anxiously back into bed knowing that sooner or later his failure will be discovered. His fear of being caught is greater each day, like the pile of buried post.
What have saved my brother over the years are the paper gardens. In his drawings he is no longer a spectator. On the contrary, there he is God. If he can be satisfied about the design of a garden, it's as if he never buried letters in it.
The neighbour who raised his hand to him from a distance has meanwhile grown from a spot in the landscape to a man of normal height. He has a broad, freckled face and wears a lumberjack's shirt from which emerge his equally broad neck and two densely hairy and meaty arms.
'Fine animal, eh?' says the man, pointing with his chin towards the dog walking on unsteady legs.
'Yes…" sighs my brother and he asks, 'Is it your dog, sir?'
'It is indeed', says freckle face with some pride and he pats the neck of the creature as it nervously turns circles around him. The conversation threatens to dry up, so he says again, 'Fine animal, fine animal.' The beast gets some more pats.
Freckle face looks at my brother from the corner of his eyes, to see if he signs of continuing the conversation.

The neighbour has recently come to feel sympathetic towards my brother. He hopes to find in him a drinking pal, a mate with whom to pass the time. He is unemployed and gets accusatory looks from the neighbours because he is the father of two uncontrollable teenagers and makes no bones of the fact that at forty-eight he is not about to go to enormous lengths to find work. His wife has a job in a supermarket and they manage quite well thank you. He feels like an outsider and grants the European in the wheelchair the same statute. Moreover, they have corpulence in common, and that only adds to his sympathy for my brother.
My brother says nothing and stares into the distance. Freckle face demonstratively does the same, as if he agrees to a pause in the meager conversation. Now my brother looks from the corners of his eyes at freckle face starring into the distance.
My brother is touched by the palpably genuine approach by this stranger (who was never any more to him than a spot in the landscape who raised his hand from time to time), but the earnestness of the neighbour's efforts and his grimace are comic. My brother has to suppress a laugh. Both sense that now something more can be said, and that in any event what is said will be a cliché. Freckle face lifts his head a little higher and peers at the clouds. My brother does the same. A cool gust blows past.
Freckle face says, 'I reckon it might just rain tonight.'
My brother could not have imagined a more meaningful utterance.

There's hardly any traffic. I'm doing seventy-five in my old Citroën. The rising sun throws long strips of light on the road surface between the undulating groups of trees. The unexpected warmth of the winter sun makes me shiver. I'm sitting slightly slumped, my left hand holding the wheel lightly, my right arm resting on the seat beside me, the radio playing. I feel a little euphoric. I got up especially early this morning in order to watch the dawn from the motorway. I've become very fond of driving on the motorways is the morning. They give me a sense of traveling, or rather of being on my way. I feel as if I'm a drifter who doesn't wish to know where he's heading, a traveler who never wants to arrive. My need for this aimless wandering springs from my deep-rooted love for the intermediate, the nowhere, the no-man's land.
Years ago for similar reasons I became fascinated by motorway restaurants. I love their ugliness. There is no place where you pause to reflect on things the way you do next to the motorway, with life literally rushing past. Motorway restaurants are a special form of architecture; arriving at them is not a true arrival. The interior is nullified by the interchangeability of the view and the nondescript nature of the furnishings. They are never someone's final destination; they are peopled by truck drivers, businessmen and travelers. Perhaps they have taken over the function of ruins. Located en route and never an aim in themselves, they are

musing places where a light melancholy overcomes you. Sometimes there's even something menacing about these anonymous places, like crime scenes. This lurking doom draws me.
Characters ought to wander about these kinds of sites of absence, in these places of latent alienation.

The high, humidly warm room reeking of chlorine resounds with a swirling chaos of echoing screams, dull murmuring, and splashing and splattering water. A fat woman with short hair and a nose like a beak stands up to her navel in the water wearing a garish swimsuit. With her hands she supports Koen's wiry body as he descends some steps uncertainly. He keeps his wan face grumpily looking downwards and purses his lips into a red, fleshy cup. When he feels the bottom under his feet, he smiles with eyes closed and lets his raised shoulders gently slump. The woman now lets go of his back and takes his left hand in her right hand, as if they are going to dance. Then she lets go.
As if the water is more familiar to him than the air, he surrenders to it, crowing as he lets himself glide. With surprising grace he pushes himself off from the side with his feet.

I look down through the high, dirty window of brown glass. Cars flash past beneath me. I'm postponing my return home in a restaurant built over the motorway.
When I turn my gaze away from the traffic and look up, I'm startled by my own head, which is unusually pale in the reflection of the window. My deep-set eyes loom before me like two alarming dark patches and my rain-wet hair reveals my forehead so that my reflection looks bald. In this macabre head I immediately recognize my brother, not myself. Dismayed, I avert my eyes. It's been months since I heard from my brother. My last letter went unanswered. He has no telephone.
I take another gulp of lukewarm coffee, get up, put on my wet coat and know that my brother will accompany me on my way back.

I climb the stairs and throw open the door to my flat. I am panting and shaking. Clenched between my fingers is an airmail envelope. I sense that the contents of this long awaited letter are terrible. I close the door.

Breathe. Breathe calmly. A chair. Sit. I tear open the envelope, free the letter and unfold it.

Brother,
my gardens autumn
I lie in the wet grass
on the way since long ago
Your brother

My head spins. My terrible premonition is confirmed. My brother is dying. Now, at exactly this moment. I'm dying with him. And look, at the same instant, thirty miles away, Koen, the most handsome of us, draws a tree for the first time. In one fanciful red line.

I lean against one shoulder in the doorway and watch a farewell scene in the morning sun through almost closed eyes. Father loads more baggage into the boot of the taxi and the driver helps him. Koen and father's new wife sit like dummies in the back seat. Elise stands in the front garden like a scarecrow. For a moment it seems as if everything is standing still, but
when father and the driver slam their doors everything moves again. Elise, father and I lift a hand and the taxi disappears in a cloud of dust.
In the distance I hear myself say something. I turn round, shuffle inside and follow the path of my brother's workroom that I have still never taken before. I open the door. Suddenly my senses seem to awake from a dream and the heat of this room falls over my shoulders like a wet cloth.
The silent Elise has left everything untouched since my brother's death. I sit at the drawing board in my brother's wheelchair. That touches me much less than I had imagined. In a deep wooden rack is the impressive pile of pencil drawings. They look so natural there that I don't feel the slightest impulse to examine them.
A large sheet of white paper is attached by four drawing pins to the wooden board, which rests on the drawing board proper at a slant. I take a pencil and cut of shavings of wood with a fine knife to give it a long, sharp
point. Elise enters the room in silence and puts a cup of tea beside me on a side table.