

**Sample from *The Waiter and the Living (De kellner en de levenden)* by Simon Vestdijk, pp. 29–34 and 154–157 in the 26th edition (2005), trans. David McKay, [mckay@openbooktranslation.com](mailto:mckay@openbooktranslation.com)**

*As I reread *The Waiter and the Living*, written between 1940 and 1948, what struck me most was how deeply the book must have been influenced by Vestdijk's wartime experiences, especially his time as a hostage of the German occupying regime. While in captivity, he wrote a non-fiction study of Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, connecting the events of the novel to the real circumstances in which he and his fellow hostages found themselves. One of his first postwar books was an ambitious psychological study of fear. In many respects, *The Waiter and the Living* is the fictional counterpart of those two projects; it explores the fear and bewilderment of the helpless civilian subjected to arbitrary authority and surrounded by the violence of war. It has also been described as a life-affirming existential novel and as a withering takedown of Christian theology.*

*I've chosen two passages that demonstrate the connections to Kafka and the war and illustrate the book's humor, energetic dialogue, and vivid descriptions. The first is from the beginning of Chapter II, "The Cinema." A motley bunch of residents has been rounded up from an apartment complex in the night by mute policemen. While some of them protested at first, they were cowed into submission by dramatic sights and sounds from the skies. As this passage begins, they have just entered a large cinema that appears to be in use as a holding center.*

## Chapter II

### The Cinema

Tjalko Schokking had barely crossed the gray-blue limestone threshold of the building, into which people were flooding from all directions, when the trumpet fanfares gave way to the ringing of church bells. That plump and pious sound, which made Mr. and Mrs. Kwets prick up their ears, was a medley of all sorts of church bells, large and small, and the largest ones droned

their low tones with the tipsy persistence of green summer flies against the large windows of a closed conservatory. Excitable little bells sometimes tried to rise out over the others, but then it was as if their large bronze brothers swelled up in protest against their trivial tinkling. The sound quality was too sharp and grating at first but quickly improved, and before long the muffled clangs were followed by a male voice with a warm yet urgent tone, announcing that they had just heard the bells of Bethlehem, recorded with a new sound system—he mentioned the brand name and model.

“And now a brief pause in our program of sacred music, dear listeners, to give you all the opportunity to devote your full attention to forming your groups. As you know, we will hand out cards in different colors for each half century. On your card, you will find the route for you to follow. As there have been a few misunderstandings, I would like to remind everyone that the color of your card reflects your date of birth, and not any other date. This is for your own convenience: you will feel more comfortable if you remain with your contemporaries. In a moment the windows will open, and upon presentation of your white clothing card you will each receive an attractive full-color map. No pushing, please, ladies and gentlemen; if we all show a little patience, we’ll be done in no time! There is nothing for you to trouble yourself about. But first, some more music, this time from our own band, the Armageddon Ramblers. If time allows, we’ll go on to some gentle sacred tunes. Then I’ll be back, dear listeners, and I hope to be able to inform you then that everything is proceeding in an orderly fashion. Information is available from the gentlemen with white bands around their arms with a red M. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls—see you soon!” The male voice fell silent, and a band struck up a merry jazz melody.

This little speech had received the close attention of the many people in the cinema, including the man with the red M on his right arm, who had looked straight up as if to take the announcement full in the face. He had a vulgar, blank expression and a stubby nose but was very courteous, and as communicative as the officers had been mute, speaking not only to the group from the complex, but also to the others who were shuffling in, many of whom ignored their own gentlemen with armbands and went to the helpful fellow for information. Countless times he repeated the slogan, “Nothing for you to trouble yourself about”—Tjalko Schokking soon began to despise him for it—and he launched into explanations about dates of birth and very sketchy

descriptions of the interior of the cinema, where elevators could take them to other floors. All this was indicated, he said, by letters and numbers they would find on their colored cards. As for the problem that the twelve new arrivals from the complex had no white clothing cards, he proclaimed that it made no difference anyhow. But what had they done with the white cards, he asked, and with their clothes? When Van Schaerbeek told him they had put on clothes of their own, his look of confusion faded, and he ran his dull eyes over the minister's nightshirt, Haack's work clothes, and young Wim Kwets in his borrowed finery: Haack's large, elegant coat, which he had learned to hitch up with both hands, like a monk in the privy, so that he wouldn't stumble. The man said, "You can simply explain that to the young lady at the register—no wait, I'll come with you. If we didn't provide clothes, then of course you don't have white cards. There have been other cases like yours, although it puzzles me." When Van Schaerbeek remarked that a great many things puzzled him, the man gave a preoccupied laugh, raised his hands as if to keep questions at bay, and led them all deeper into the lobby.

After Veenstra had slipped his notebook into his pocket, with his notes for what he later described to Tjalko as a "hard-hitting exposé," he hung back a few moments longer to talk to a tall, gawky teenage boy who appeared to be on his own. The boy had caught his eye not just because he was bare-headed—although otherwise dressed just like all the others, right up to the most wizened elders—but because his forehead had a deep gash, which was not bleeding and had not been bandaged. The talkative man had made it clear to them that all these people had been issued identical clothing, so whoever was wearing different clothes was immediately identifiable as having been denied that privilege.

As the jazz gave way to a new round of subdued bell-ringing, they formed a line in front of one of the closed ticket booths, taking in the lobby around them. It was an enormous space, filling almost half the area of the building, and much, much more in a vertical direction. The creamy yellow walls, almost undecorated, were lit with the same raking light as the advertisements outside. A large golden M in a wreath topped with an upright sword was the only thing that punctuated these vast surfaces, at regular intervals; there were no signs, photographs, or printed announcements, not even over the ticket booths. The lobby could just as easily have been found in a stock exchange or in a temple to some arbitrary Muse. There were at least forty ticket booths, closed with copper gates, a few of which were being leaned on by weary people.

The glass doors that gave access to the inner workings of the building—if the huge lobby left any space for inner workings—were in the rear, screened off with pleated yellow curtains. It was remarkably silent, even though new visitors were still constantly pouring inside, to the point where some groups had to be stopped at the door by armbanded assistants. Those who were admitted had to leave behind any flags, signs, and banners. Astonished, bemused, or resigned, the newcomers stared out ahead of them; oddly enough, only one group's members were even whispering to each other, with frequent, furtive glances over their shoulders. No one had brought luggage. On the smooth, reflective floor, monogrammed with a huge M artfully worked into the pattern of the stones, the shuffling of their feet made no sound, and any source of commotion—a one-legged man without crutches who lost his escort, or a woman who fainted, or a child without a mother—was soon dealt with, whether bystanders took care of it quietly or a gentleman in an armband rushed to the scene. These assistants, who expected nothing in return for their efforts, spent much of their time offering glasses of water, which were sometimes turned down; since everyone was pale in the face, and every new event was the object of greedy stares, there appeared to be more takers for water than there really were. Although the large lobby was not stuffy, it was far from cool, and Wim Kwets had removed the overcoat. His mother had it draped over her arm and did not think to return it to Haack.

Tjalko Schokking, who stood next to his mother, touching her shoulder from time to time to reassure either her or himself, was joined by Henk Veenstra, who murmured, “I have a new theory.” His hand went to his inside pocket, though he did not actually pull out his notebook. “I’ve been talking to that young fellow, and you know what he told me? That he was born in 1801, and they put him in the group for 1750 to 1800. Says he got that gash in his forehead from a boathook just outside the port of IJmuiden; he was a ship’s boy, he tells me, and it was an accident, not a fight or anything. What do you make of a loony story like that? But the strangest thing was that he really did use weird, old-fashioned words. He said ‘in the forenoon,’ for instance—I happen to know that’s an old word for ‘morning.’ Still, that could just be a funny local dialect. You know what I think? I think they’re all out of their minds. The revolution of the loonies, and here we are, stuck in the middle.”

“Don’t get carried away, now, Henk,” said Mrs. Schokking, laughing.

“You might as well say we’ve been invaded by Martians,” Tjalko grumbled. “Most of these people are acting just as normal as any of us, though of course you do have to be a little crazy to let yourself get dragged to a place like this. And how do you explain the clothes they’re wearing, and those cards, and the whole system here? Those guys with white armbands don’t seem the least bit loony to me. Have you seen how hard they’re working, fetching water left and right?!”

“As if loonies can’t fetch water. I can hear you’ve never been to an insane asylum. A loony can play any role, no matter how normal.”

“But you can’t get a thousand loonies to play the same role. That young man must have realized you’re a newspaper reporter and wanted to make an impression. Did he ask you for money?”

“Money,” the journalist repeated slowly. “Strange—I have the impression that’s the very thing these people *don’t* care about. I pumped a few others for information but didn’t get much out of them. One girl asked how I liked her pretty new clothes—she seemed a little feeble-minded—and another was amazed by the size of this lobby, but they all seemed... somehow detached from it all. As if they couldn’t care less about any of it, I mean.”

“I feel the same way,” Mrs. Schokking said absent-mindedly. She stared at the booth ahead of them, and a few moments later, with a bang, it was opened, and a woman’s head with an anonymous hairstyle appeared at the window.

“Like you couldn’t care less?!” Tjalko squawked in indignation.

“No, like *they* couldn’t,” his mother replied, as she pushed forward.

Van Schaerbeek came up to them.

“Sorry to butt in. The thing is... I’ve been talking to Mr. Kwets and Mr. Haack, and we think we’re finally onto the... uh... deeper meaning of this whole charade.”

“Whatever’s coming next, I disagree,” said Tjalko.

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*The second passage is set in the mysterious railway station where much of the action takes place. One member of the group, the actor Richard Haack, has wandered off on his own. Two passing references to other sections of the book have been omitted for clarity.*

Excerpt from Chapter VI, “Richard Haack’s Adventure”

Haack had always had a weakness for the moon in the third quarter, as it appeared on late, lonely nights or, much more rarely, by the pale light of morning. There was something so sad, so tragically twisted about it, that you didn’t have to be a Pierrot to send your wordless laments drifting up to that misshapen celestial body. It was not merely the mirror image of the waxing first quarter sometimes spotted at dusk; it was a cosmic monstrosity, the situs inversus of the deepest heavens, pathetic in the extreme. This moon, on the other hand, shining between the arc lights, was completely alien to him. It was a satellite for which he felt nothing, and it seemed to make no claims on human compassion.

This could be explained in part by its position relative to the clouds in its segment of the night sky. Instead of occupying a place behind the clouds, or at least next to them, the moon was unmistakably in front of them. Richard Haack gasped when he saw, at the edge of a sharply serrated cloud, a second moon emerging, likewise dented on the right. It came to him in a flash that this was it, what he’d dreaded all his life, more than pain, torture, blood, or any creature that bled. The second moon! Panic seized hold of him at the sight of that apocalyptic horror. Yes, he knew there were other planets with moons coming out of their ears, so to speak, but hadn’t the earth, since time immemorial, always shown the fidelity, the innate decency to have only one moon? When the accursed second satellite went into hiding behind a new cloud, he let out a sigh of relief. Maybe he had imagined it. Even in a dream, you could make mistakes, especially if you knew you were dreaming.

He walked on, keeping a close eye on the sky to his left. There was still something brewing there; from time to time, things moved that he felt might not bear close scrutiny. Amid the blue and silvery churning of the chubby behemoths ran a transitional zone, a street of cloud, where precise and subtle signals flickered of a great undertaking, primarily martial in nature—

not chilling, but familiar, like the elusive mosaic behind your eyelids in the dark. Not without amusement, the night wanderer saw minuscule figures shoot from the edge of one cloud to another, like tiny parachutists. Slanting downwards like streams of rain, they seldom reached the level of the railways, which turned right onto a broad embankment and dwindled away into the distant mist. All this was actually quite difficult to make out through the glare of the arc lights close by. From time to time, a train sped off into the ghostly distance—sometimes two, one right after the other. Only in rare moments was the pedestrian bridge where he stood not shaken by the thundering below. The fact that the second moon had the decency to remain out of sight strengthened his conviction that he had stumbled into a dream fragment that belonged more truly to him than to the others from the complex.

After closing his eyes for a moment, he took a fresh look at the tumult in the clouds, endeavoring to alter it by force of will, to picture a scene against some bottomless blue backdrop drawn from his memories of paintings of the Last Judgment: the Father, vague and gray and stern; below, the Son, well-meaning if a little standoffish, plucked straight out of the Gospels for his new judicial duties; the Holy Ghost, like a half-effaced dove somewhere in the sky; Michael in his radiant armor, holding a crude, old-fashioned balance; and off to one side below him a kind of butcher who, after slitting the throats of the souls like pigs to the slaughter, sent the whole mound of meat tumbling downwards: sinners, thieves, murderers, lechers, nude women (with nothing more than that on their conscience), a few homosexuals, in a movement mirrored by the rising column of the glorified, with Maria cloaked in black at the top, her eyes moist with beatitude and faith. Every eye was raised to salvation like an opened oyster, a glistening gob of devotion. If he had managed to stage the traditional scene there among the clouds, to make it enduring and compelling, then he might at a later stage have reversed the roles, hurling the blessed down into the pit while raising the rogues to the right hand of God. But the scene in the distance remained just as it was: a strategic repositioning, an espionage campaign, a simple rainfall and hailstorm of moonlit figures, who were no longer of this earth yet apparently not exalted enough for Heaven.

Suddenly, a terrible stench reached his nostrils: a whiff of corpse odor, there could be no mistaking it! He had smelled it once on the coast of Algiers, when Moorish castaways had washed up there. At least it wasn't the smell of blood... He took a few cautious steps in the

direction of the stench, craning his neck over the railing of the bridge to make out as much as he could of the other side. He could see that the bridge was closed off halfway by a large gate; stench or no stench, he would have to turn back. On the far side, at the outer limit of the rail yard—nothing lay beyond but a few factories with a church tower rising above them—one of the platforms extended further than the others, and because the bridge descended right into the middle of it, he could view its whole length by leaning over first the left-hand and then the right-hand railing.

The platform was closed off on the station side with another iron gate and had no waiting rooms or other structures. The forms stretched out over the platform in no way resembled the usual groups of waiting passengers. They lay half-draped across each other, like animals; they also seemed to be as naked as animals; and a few of them lifted their heads in an animal way, searching, waiting; but however horned and tangle-haired they were, they did not have animal heads but something else entirely, something absolutely different. It was something indescribable. Now and then they moved, with a soft clank of chains and another wave of stench. Like predators by a watering hole, they were encamped there, half tamed, waiting in a kind of noble dejection to perform some nameless task, a labor beyond imagination and without a future.

“This is the 500th platform,” Richard Haack said aloud, and in his mind’s eye the number 500 took on grotesque proportions, even worse than the mysterious figures themselves. Yes, this was the platform none were allowed to enter, from which no trains departed—the platform of which old Van der Woght had spoken.... No doubt some of the animals were sleeping. Those that were not looked up and jingled and stank. Some were very large, others smaller than people. Their heads lifted, leaned towards each other, and separated again; what occupied the 500th platform was the utterly inhuman; Haack sensed it in the pit of his stomach, but he also sensed he had nothing in common with them. Even so, maybe they were his brothers, these... devils. He lifted his hand, and retraced his steps.