

*My Foreign Trip* by Dirk van Weelden

Listen, a while ago I found myself in a small foreign country not so far away. That's what I want to tell you about. It's quite clear at the border that you're entering a different country where everything's genuinely different and there's a different culture. As a tannoy voice begins to count up: 1,2,3,4! visitors have to enter a small park containing monuments through crowd control barriers to get into the country. It's a more or less compulsory introduction to the place you are entering. Taken together, the monuments express something like the basic principles the country is based upon in the eyes of its inhabitants. The first is an impressive-looking flower pot with an plant bold upright in it, a lonely stalk, in fact. The whole stands for the earth element, *numero uno*. Next, there's a tiny pond with an enormous swan floating on it, elegantly uniting the number two and the water element with its curved neck.

As the voice surrounded by echoes cries 'three!', the visitor passes a wooden colossus composed of three vertical wooden beams which give a clever impression of being on fire (I suspect gas flames issue from hidden nozzles). Right, so the fire element, in the form of a Roman three. When I was there, they even provided the wonderful smell of burning cedar wood, which lent a surprisingly welcoming feeling to everything and made the sight of the next tableau even more festive. This was an extensive field of grass above which a multi-coloured hot air balloon floated, representing the wind element. It was a spectacle that aroused a lot of enthusiasm from the children among the visitors. Four! Four! They chimed in chorus to the voice from the loudspeaker.

After a short walk along a winding path to a kind of aircraft hangar, we arrived at monument number 5. A feeble female voice came from the ceiling, practically whispering, and all she said was 'five... spa-ace, five... spa-ace', like an answering machine stuck on a loop. In the hangar there was a beautiful spaceship we were allowed to walk around. If you looked properly, the monster shaped like a five, but that wasn't the entire point, the men from the border police told us. They proudly explained that this was a tribute to the inventors of the artificial gravity that could be created on spaceships like this one.

When I was outside again I stood in a sun-drenched landscape with a view of a clump of trees with a large brick house amongst them. It had windows behind which there was darkness, true inky black darkness; a house that was as dead normal as it was spooky. I didn't dare imagine what it was like inside, who lived there and what their life was like. I decided to ignore it and walk on. Beyond it, the foreign country began in full.

There was a train on a straight stretch of track running through an open meadow; it continued all the way to the horizon. The coaches had a classical, old-fashioned form; they had delicate doors with rounded corners which looked like the doors to vaults. The first coach was bright yellow, the next one was green, the next one red, then a white one and finally a blue one; after that the same colour sequence was repeated. This coloured ribbon of train coaches stood motionlessly in the field and continued further than the eye could see.

As I walked along the train, looking at the birds and rabbits, and cats, spiders and the skeletons of what had probably been dogs, a young man joined me. I couldn't get a good look at him because he stayed behind me, however I moved around. He chatted away with enthusiastic ease. Soon I had grown used to his voice. The thing was that he was inviting me to step into the train and follow him through his country so that I could get to know it. His voice, the old-fashioned train and the surroundings gave off a precise and concentrated impression and, in particular, his claim that life in his country was about a Now that had absorbed past and present, had a hypnotic effect. Before I realized it, we had started walking through the train. There were people inside but we didn't look at them. It was quiet, everyone's attention was on what was outside, the field next to the stationary train.

The world appeared like a film projected onto the walls of a tunnel. This wasn't because the train set off but because we strolled through the coaches and looked outside. Each coach was like a day with an identical routine, sometimes blue, then yellow, but identical and stationary. Outside, as the voice said, there was just one supreme being and that was the hand that drew. A human hand holding a sharp pen. This was the source of all

movement and change. And it never stops and every day is the last day, he said. Everything that happens is a reaching for a better life to come, and all the dilemmas that come with that are visible all around you, day after day. Keep on walking, come on, advance.

And so I became involved in this foreign country's daily routine. As my guide chattered away about the Big Bang, the Roman Empire, the Second World War and the Baltic states, my eyes turned to what was happening outside. It most resembled that effect when you're zapping from channel to channel on a TV and there are only cartoons showing. But then very slowly because we were walking through a tunnel of train coaches and outside everything only became visible gradually. There was a library and a university on fire, Vaclav Havel and Kim Jung Il appeared, there were bottlenecks and demonstrations.

All of sudden he was standing there, with his trousers around his ankles, a fairly youthful Adolf Hitler who popped up in the distance, with a mile-long erection running parallel to the train. He looked a little surprised and gave the fascist greeting with the wrong hand, the left, because he was using the other to make a contemporary gesture, the bird. In the meantime, a cabal of texts had burst loose in which swearwords and provocations could be heard. Heil Fuckerrr!

What in god's name was all this excitement about the German dictator who had died more than seventy years ago? We're not in history, the man behind me said, we're in an motionless present that contains all the versions of the past, including imaginary versions which are just as strong here as the versions which are accepted as gospel abroad by everyone else and worshipped as the source of all judgements about good and evil.

And he pointed outside where there was a smoking ruin of a housing block, a jeep with American MPs on board. He pointed at a boy wearing lederhosen, who was walking unhappily past the piles of rubble. Look, he said, that's me, not very nicely drawn, it's true, a bit too old, since I was born just after the war but the question is, what would it be like to grow up among the ruins of Berlin, what would Dad have been like, and Mum?

I began to understand how things worked in this country. It was as large as that row of identical days that stood on the tracks like regularly coloured railway carriages. And the drawing hand filled up the country every day and gave it energy and events. Everything that happened was a declaration of independence: this country is founded anew every hour and won from its foreign neighbours. We exist! And we are allowed to exist! And it can't be argued with, even if we distribute unsympathetic images, berate, and embrace other imaginary versions of the past or long for an impossible new country. All those monkeys and insects, those pigs that shit on the national flag, the herds of question marks and that procession of racing cars, they are the inhabitants of this country and all have the right to exist. Nothing is suspect or forbidden here. Well, no, that's not entirely true. There is one taboo: moaning and complaining and saying that this country would be better off not existing. Even though the country is based on questions and conflicts, dilemmas and anger, even though images of darkness, death and decay crop up, there is no tolerance of negative opinions about the country itself. That would make the skies come tumbling down and everything would cease to exist.

As Adolf Hitler's prick jutted proudly across the expanses, we walked further along the train. The young man hummed a little and pointed at the elegant hands filling up the field. They were all holding fine-liner pens. Adolf's shaft did a loop the loop in a sea of drawing hands. The name of a website that contained the vision the country had been based on was written or tattooed on the skin of Hitler's prick.

DutchDemocraticRepublic.com. What I understood from my travelling companion's explanations was the following. It is an imaginary country where freedom is constantly inventing itself by jumbling up the past - without taking into account anything people in other countries consider to be true, decent or desirable. A land where everyone has the right to free speech because nobody can silence another with moral one-upmanship.

Things got livelier. There were no longer any people in the carriages we walked through, but they were packed with drawing hands. Outside I recognized the swan in the tiny pond, I saw air balloons again with 4s on them and lots of cats. The burning Roman 3.

My travelling companion was also getting into the swing, chanting in a singsong voice that the past didn't exist and the next life was just like now. Coloured flags waved. To complete the exuberance my guide cried out: I'm a great artist! And as he said it, the field filled with naked elf girls as far as the eye could see. The transparent wings on their narrow backs made a deafening, rustling noise. They knelt, spread their legs, skipped, let themselves fall over backwards or sat meditating in the lotus position. They seemed turned inwards yet still aware of us; when they looked at us they were expressionless and watchful, like animals in the woods. I was visiting an incredibly happy part of the country. Imagination had made this country free, healthy, energetic, a place of pleasure and strange tranquillity, even if it was just because of the repetition of the elegant elf girls.

We continued our journey through the train and outside the drawing hand continued to create extra-terrestrial beings, alternative maps of Europe that rewrote history, adapting to the needs and demands of the inhabitants, and then it suddenly grew darker. The carriage we were walking through was empty. No extras, and no drawing hands. Quiet and spookily empty. I caught a glimpse of a hand using a fine-liner to add the last deep black bead to a giant mask that rose up next to the train. Its expression was of shock and horror. *Love is hate* was now written on Hitler's cock. I walked on in a depressed frame of mind, suddenly surrounded by grumpy-looking people who gazed outside with me where incomprehensible geometry diagrams appeared and DDR policemen injured crucified Jesuses using sickles. The elf girls had lost their wings and stood to attention like soldiers. The further I walked the more skeletons I saw among them. The end of Adolf's prick was finally in sight. And at not an opportune moment. There was a flipside to that emancipatory, provocative gesture, that was clear. A measly amount of fluid issued from the tip.

In parting, the Führer announced that the enemy was negativity, otherwise you should just top yourself. It's all or nothing, my guide whispered. Above us, the heavens filled with skulls. Thousands floated above the train; it was a macabre moment. The Dutch Democratic Republic, at first so energetically praised, appeared like a dilapidated

farmstead, high above it flew the flag of Frustrica, also known as Dudland, Crapvia or Wearyland.

We had penetrated so deep into this strange foreign country that I felt like I was walking into a wall. What now? Would everything start again or would I be thrown out of the country? I really didn't know what to think. It was as though the story the country had used to present itself to me had been exhausted. Where should I go? Was there still place for me or would it be better to leave?

Something remarkable occurred. My guide paused in a blue coach and pointed at a bench. This meridian runs at 20 degrees east, he said. It is the true border between East and West. In South Africa, the Indian and the Atlantic oceans meet and up to Europe, it forms the secret frontier between two worlds. The Wall is there, it's where history eternally repeats. That's where I am.

It was as though he wanted to emphasize that I and all the other visitors to this country never, but never would understand this country, and would never be able to integrate, forever remaining strangers. The drawing hand was omnipotent but would never take into account visitors like myself.

Outside more maps appeared on which continents changed colour, empires intertwined and in the meantime, everything multiplied, probably as a result of the unbridgeable secret border between East and West. I cannot claim that I understood much or remembered much of the diagrams and ever repeating and varying drawings which revealed the country's creation story. It dazzled me. But what I do remember is this. The long rows of houses where Next Mama and Next Papa lived were a kind of barracks, the sphere was claustrophobic, but between the buildings there was freedom. It determined the space in between in giant lettering, even becoming an item of clothing for a man and a woman. Aside from a father and a mother, there was also a boy and a girl. Again and again, the scene and the family changed in a combinatorial array. The danger gradually subsided, as did the crying faces and heads turned into terrestrial globes. The chains that had begun

as fetters were broken and wagged like tails attached to the figures. The children grew wings.

After a while, two hands held a bi-coloured globe. Blue and white, then red and white, green and white. The division was varyingly overcome by the repetition of figures that were half girl, half boy. Vertical halves that joined two worlds and also two globes. My travelling companion said in explanation that he thought this was the ideal land, Eden, God's appearance on earth, namely Brussia, where brother and sister, equal, as Adam and Eve, yet also as a single being, founded a world. It was indeed a beautiful image, an elegantly drawn solution to a written mathematical sum that had taken up miles and had taken us from claustrophobia to freedom, an image of happiness.

The sun shone, anger and provocations were no longer necessary. I said goodbye and got out of the final carriage. My guide held up his hand, nodded and already seemed lost in thought. No smile could get through. He turned abruptly and legged it. It was just a short walk before I saw a border post loom up. There were strange flags flying, hammers and sickles on a red background with a red, white and blue border and a communist flag with the Venus symbol of a woman. In this country, new imaginary states and nations were popping up constantly. It was what kept the country going.

Back in my own country, I wondered where I'd been. I've been to other countries before that consisted entirely of words and images, where reality and history appeared radically different to the ones I was used to. Often the quality of the experience of such a trip was due to the fact that everything seemed to have been designed for me as a visitor. Or at least, the entire country seemed to be set up for visitors and to play games with their expectations and responses. Indeed, such countries sought self-justification in what happened in the hearts and heads of their visitors. They were what caused the countries to exist. In countries like that, you felt you had a role to play as a visitor, even though you only understood part of what was happening.

It was totally different in this country. This was a country that didn't turn itself into theatre or live off its contact with visitors. It didn't nourish itself by being visited and

seen. This land fought for its existence, it wasn't a show: words and images were life in the country. So as not to succumb to the pressure of the presence of other countries, a new existence, a new free space was created day in day out. The flipside of this was the repetition, the noise, the incomprehensibility, the impenetrable mixture of banality and symbolism. At least for the visitor, since in the country itself everything was of equal importance. Everything equally true. Everything was right.

The inhabitants of this country were hospitable and happy to show everything there was to experience there. But they didn't count on being understood. They considered that impossible. They even felt it to be an unpleasant, dangerous idea. They'd rather you viewed and admired the cohesion they displayed and represented through the arrangement of their world without too much commentary. And then you should go back to your own country and leave them be.

The country I visited could only continue to exist by creating its radical own world and this requires big words, maps and theories, amazing connections between minute mundane details and world history. This is not theatre but a means of survival. And though I goggled at all the mental leaps, the little games and jokes, the care and attention to detail, the very different styles in which the country was drawn, from clumsy and childish to elegant and humorous or maniacal, it was mainly the rebellion, the pure-spirited rage behind it that moved me.

In order to exist, this country's inhabitants have to work hard and then some more, there's never any rest; only with great dedication and concentration can the individuality and coherence of this country endure. It's logical that there are traces of doubt and despair. The country's inhabitants are alone in their fight to exist as a country, and their loneliness is both impossible and necessary. It is a vulnerable country that depends on its peace and neutrality. To survive, the inhabitants will have to relate to others, but to translate their world into that of another is highly risky, it would soon risk losing all of its cohesion and individuality.

Another word for something that is both impossible and necessary is a utopia. A nowhere-land. Something that should exist but cannot exist anywhere. An imaginary solution that corrects everything that goes wrong. And so in all stories and representations of utopia, you can trace the injustice, pain or misery that the utopia offers a solution to. You can see what kind of a fix the creators are trying to escape. It's no different for this country.

The country I just visited is also a nowhere-land. The wonder is that we can visit it and that it welcomes us unconditionally. That it wasn't actually made for us doesn't mean that we can't learn from it, or enjoy it, or marvel at it. Thanks to the detours it is made up of, the built-in distance created by all those maps, flags and theories, all the allusions to totalitarian states and military-guarded borders, we, as visitors can get so close and travel right across this country and still catch a glimpse of what it is like to live there.

And even though this is a strange country where I felt like an astonished outsider at times, the visit was a meaningful and even confrontational experience. At moments, the country had a remarkable effect on me. It made me think back to the time when as a fourteen-year-old, I discovered that I was incapable of believing in my parent's Christianity and couldn't talk to anyone about it. By way of reaction, I made up my own gods whom I praised in long poems and buried rings for in a wood at full moon. I designed the tattoos I'd have for my own gods. What I wanted to say by that is this: the seed of a country like this is inside all of us. I recommend you visit the country Tobias Tebbe has unlocked for us, while bearing that in mind.

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Translated by Michele Hutchison