

Long before there were words

A performance by Bart and Anouk

1.

The stage is full of paintings and drawings by Bart. One square is empty. Anouk steps into the empty square.

Anouk:

There are words
that touch
there are the same words
that say nothing

Words can be full or empty
words can burst
words can rip open, leak
they can breathe their last breath,
exhale and expire

Each living word weighs at least twenty-one grams
that's why I find it so hard
to really say what in heaven's name inspires me
have you any idea
how much 'in heaven's name' itself weighs?

I'm careful with what I say
not a single word must break
because I idly let it fall
because I misjudged the weight

I'm afraid my words will die
between my mouth and your ear

Anouk exits.

2.

Bart steps into the square with his cello. He sits down.

Bart:

I'm practising the first movement of Bach's cello suite number three again. It sounds as if no other music came before it. As if nothing else has ever sounded.

Bart plays BACH - cello suite number three, first movement

3.

Bart:

At home, when I was little, we used to listen to the Flemish radio every morning. The classical station. I was allowed to choose by ear what I'd like to play later, when I was a bit older. It was the cello. When I went to the academy, a new instrument was made for me. I went to Jaap Bolink's workshop. Jaap reached down a piece of wood from the highest shelf. Shall we use this one? From then on, I was often to be found in the workshop, watching as he made the curves in the sheets of wood, with first bold then tiny gouging movements. How, with a sharp knife, he meticulously cut out the F holes that were part of his design and made these (*pointing*) inviting little protruding points. A beauty spot on the back and one more directly beneath it, on the other side of the central line. And how he added brown pegs with black dots, like a woman with brown curls. Then, one day, the soundboard was fitted, still white, the instrument was strung and it sounded for the first time.

Bart lets the strings sound.

Anouk:

Was I born yet? I think you must be around twenty when you first went to the academy. After your A levels, first a year of maths, so that makes you around 20. I was born in the same year your cello was made. I think.

Bart:

At the academy, I learned to play the cello for real. 'Bow, bow and bow again, using the whole bow, playing the string with the flat hair for a powerful sound. And vibrating to make the note sing'. With your first finger, second, third and the weak little finger, too. Continuously vibrating. After the official work during the day, in the evenings I wanted to do something completely different. I turned out the lights, lit the candles and created my own bubble. Then it sounded like this. (*He plays high notes on the bridge*). I'm playing in the wrong place. Not using anything like all the hair. And the vibrating becomes a kind of sliding along the neck. Then I imagined I was a kind of Jimi Hendrix of the cello.

Bart plays like Jimi Hendrix.

4.

The music changes.

Anouk:

I'm four years old. Mister van Dijk, the headmaster of the primary school, is leaving. The teacher has asked if I would like to take part in a play. They dress me in green tights and a green jumper with cardboard leaves on my head and they make my face up. They let me be a flower in the background.

(Anouk is briefly a flower in the background).

After the show, I don't want my make-up taken off. I'm dying for everyone to see I was the flower.

But the make-up has to come off, the costume has to come off, I have to learn reading and arithmetic and I've got a clever head on me so I have to do well in my exams.

5.

Anouk:

I push my body ahead of me
against all resistance
I have to and I will push my heels through the sand
over roads covered in dust
over asphalt bridges, squares
alongside take-away coffee stands
because my road takes me on
I push and push and push...
and gravity keeps on dragging at that body of mine
oh if I only had wings

I come to a stop, look round
at the road I've travelled
and then at the sky
there's always a bird to be seen somewhere
two seagulls circling above the city
I watch as they sweep swoop soar
through the air
I'm gasping for room for air
oh if I only had wings

I wouldn't leave a trace
never have to look back
because there's no way back for someone with wings
I sigh
then walk past myself
I take my arms
thrown them around my shoulders
and drag my body further
along behind myself
I pull and pull and pull...
I've still got a long way to go to be myself
oh if I only had wings

6.

In the following text, Anouk is holding Bart's cello

Bart:

I'm standing in front of the door. With a bag full of thirty books. It's not just playing the cello; I have to know all about the theory, too. For my final theory exam, I've chosen Bartok's

fourth string quartet, because I think it's so lovely. I never would have imagined that thirty books had been written about it. I open the door. At the little table sits the examiner, the late composer Tristan Keuris, who left us far too soon. A big shock of red curls, flashing spectacle lenses, music through and through. I sit down and set the thirty books between us on the table, as tangible evidence of my knowledge. He asks the questions and I give the answers. But he becomes increasingly restless and, at some point, he's unable to contain himself any longer. With one mighty sweep of the arm he knocks all the books from the table. They fall to the ground with a thundering din. He fishes out the score and sets it on the grand piano, gesturing for me to come and sit next to him. Then he starts into this incredibly difficult piece for four string players. Playing with two hands. Whatever he's unable to play he sings along. And, all the while, he cries out, asking whether I can hear what the music is about. Can I hear how the motif in the cello is propelling the music along? Can I hear the two violins chasing one another at the top?

I'm speechless. I have no words. In one fell swoop, Tristan transports me from a language about music to a language that comes from the music itself.

That galvanises me.

A little while later, I decide not to be a classical cellist but to go into the theatre. I start playing with Orkater. With the desire to intertwine language and music as intimately as possible. We play all over the place, but I still feel a bit as if I'm that cellist in the background. Because, of course, everyone wants to know how the story ends. Finally, the day comes. I'm given a speaking part. Two words. I sit nervously throughout the show waiting for my turn. Then I say, 'Quite likely'.

But it's not enough. I've got more to say than that. It galvanises me again.

Then I suppose I'll just have to become a man of words. I put away my cello, step down from the stage and go into the city.

7.

Bart takes his cello from Anouk. He plays.

Anouk:

There is a city

built of words

the heaviest form of foundation

a city built on

mercy, acquiescence, responsibility, objection

the higher the building

the lighter the language

swallowtail, sea breeze, confetti, cat bell

those with many words

are wealthy here

and build the highest towers

there is a man whose vocabulary reaches to the heavens

he has words such as

arachnophobia, anthropomorphisation, circumlocution, palaeontology

no one has ever seen him behind his walls of language

there are also people who have nothing
or just a few little letters,
maybe two little words
that easily blow away
they lay themselves down to sleep in the shade of the word palaces
sleeping with their heads on
hoohah, thingamajig, claptrap, cockwomble, quite likely
they snuggle up together
smelling each other's proximity
and they love
sweetly and quietly

Bart plays blithely on

8.

Anouk:

The most beautiful and the saddest love story I know is Romeo and Juliet.

Bart starts up the music.

Anouk:

I'm fourteen years old. Finally, I'm allowed to take part in the school play. I'm given the role of Juliet. And Michael from the sixth form is Romeo. I read the script at home. 'Romeo kisses Juliet,' I read. This makes me really nervous because I've never kissed anybody yet. In rehearsals, the director says, 'Just give her a kiss on the cheek'. I manage to get through the rehearsals embarrassed and blushing. And then comes the opening night. *(Stands on a stool)* I'm standing on the wooden balcony that's been erected in the school assembly hall. My parents are in the audience. Romeo ascends the exterior of the balcony, clammers over the balustrade and 'Romeo kisses Juliet'. And Michael's putting his tongue in my mouth.

The music stops abruptly. Anouk is silent. Bart starts playing again. Then Anouk says:

Anouk:

It doesn't end well. Romeo and Juliet die. Michael does his A levels and leaves school. And me, I lose something of myself.

9.

Anouk:

I watch you go
watch you go
You dive into the sea of people

I'm 65% water
But that 35% that doesn't flow
has me stuck fast at these traffic lights

They turn green
turn green
Time, people, possibilities
flow past me
I'm going nowhere
Treading water
treading
I hold my breath one, two, buckle my shoe
one, two
I don't suffocate
don't suffocate I

watch you go
Your tail fin in the distance waves goodbye
goodbye
goodbye

Water flows to the lowest point
My grief is in my boots
Only once the tide retreats
do I wring myself out

I wish
I wish
a shell to my ear
That I could hear the sea
with you in it
with you
with you

10.

Anouk:

there is a town
in my imagination
a town by the sea
at the foot of a mountain
with winding streets
narrow houses
gay flowers
I need say no more
you, too, can already imagine it
and exactly as it is
do you see?
a salty gust
for the wind is always howling here
pining

because it can only rise in my imagination
ditties nestle
between the walls of the houses
do you hear?
everything is sunny
there's nothing to cast a shadow
after all, dreams are transparent
at night stars fall
getting caught on the guttering
luminous wishes to show you the way home
there is a town
in my imagination
a town by the sea
my journey was long
I come home
the lights are on everywhere
the only thing that can cast a shadow
is me

11.

Anouk:

I did it. I passed. My A levels. Finally, I can do as I please. I go to study theatre. I move from a village to the big city, where anything and everything is possible.

Bart:

I wander through the city. In the dark. So where has my muse got to? When I was still playing the cello and acting, I had something like the artist's proverbial muse, which whispers in your ear so you know what you have to do. And now? Where has she got to? Can I hear her voice? In the night? I wander through the dark.

12.

Anouk picks up a microphone.

Anouk:

Am I there if you can hear me?
Now?
Am I there now?
Is my voice enough for me to be there?

Can we be in the things we leave behind us?
Can I fill the lonely corners of your body with my voice?
Can I give a bottom to the depths of your darkest thoughts just by talking?

Can I tempt you to step with me into your emptiness like a cathedral?
We push open the heavy doors

Light falls through the stained glass
Our footsteps echo on the marble
I take your hand
Can you feel your hand in mine?
Or, rather: can you feel my hand in yours?
It fits better that way

Are you still listening now I've got nothing more to say?
Now?
And now?

13.

Anouk:

I've lost it. After four years of theatre studies, I've stopped enjoying acting. I don't want to be on stage any longer. I'm going to write.

Bart:

You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to the radio, to the classical station, Radio 4. Maybe there I can do both language and music. And if I get angry letters because I talk too much, after all those Radio 4 listeners really have all the time to write them, I'll just stop. I do it anyway. Can they hear how that cello motif is propelling the music along? Can they hear how the violins are chasing one another at the top?
I move to the media town.

Anouk:

There is a city, an old city...

Bart:

And, in the evenings, I whisper into listeners' ears...

Anouk:

... which stretches out across the landscape like a body...

Bart:

... I seduce and enchant them...

Anouk:

... anyone approaching is watched with a thousand eyes...

Bart:

... I transport them...

Anouk:

... its breath gives you headwind or sucks you towards it...

Bart:

... until they lose themselves...

Anouk:

.. its tongue is the drawbridge that grants access to it...

Bart:

... I, myself, become a muse...

Anouk:

... those who hesitate too long at the gate are simply licked inside...

Bart:

... come...

Anouk:

This city is alive.

Music and microphone

14.

Anouk:

it swallows you up in its narrow streets that crinkle like brains
there, ideas light up like neon signs
tempting you to venture deeper
taking you to the heart of the city
where you can rent rooms by the hour
to press your face against her warm bosom
the heart pumps water round its canals like blood
it leaks people from all its pores:
on foot, on bikes, scooters, in buses and taxis
ever more
that flow of living infiltrators takes possession of it
proliferates in its capillaries
those who come, stay
polluting the lungs of the city
the great arterial roads clog up
in the armpits of the city, the sweat appears like brownish-yellow rust stains
in the cracks of the houses you can count its wrinkles

who can close its shutters?
who sings its thousand eyes to sleep?
who will remember it as it once was?

15.

Bart stands just behind Anouk.

Anouk:

You're straying from your path
don't do it
you're straying
avoiding streetlamps
you wear the dark like a coat
you think you can always go back home
you wonder where your legs are taking you
you wonder what your fingers are grasping at
a latch
a door
any one, but the right one for you
you go inside
don't do it
in the gloom, you perceive what perhaps isn't there
but what shows itself vividly to you
invisible hands unzip your coat
word for word
they unbutton your jacket
pull off your shirt
undo your belt
don't do it
– why can't your voice be heard? –
undress you
arms fold around you
– where are yours? –
lithe, supple fingers play the strings of your body
lips improvise a tune on your mouth
a jazzy voice wraps you up in words
don't do it
this room is breathing
it seductively smokes one cigarette after another
until your head goes up in smoke
where is your place?

Anouk takes the cello from Bart and leaves the stage.

16.

Bart:

I've lost it. This whole quest for the muse is so entrancing that I finally write a thesis on it. Never imagined I'd be able to find two hundred books to explain what the muse can still mean to us now in our work and life. I've brought the most important as tangible proof of knowledge. They help me raise the images on the ground a little (*lifts one or two drawings to show the books*): homo ludens, man the player, man the maker, man the narrator and so on... I've become a man of words. Eighty thousand words I wrote. A man of science. There I

stand. On the first floor. In front of seven highly-educated ladies and gentlemen in black jackets and black berets. They ask the questions and I give the answers. Then the bedel comes in with a stick with bells on it and the ritual comes to an end. Two taps on the ground (*Anouk taps on the ground with the cello*). Hora est. (*silence*). Then I know. I've lost it. I don't play anymore.

Bart leaves the stage.

Bart:

The next morning, I wake up. With a strong urge to draw. No more words for the moment. But, in my head, there are all kinds of voices, saying, 'Don't do it. Cobbler, stick to your last; you're a lecturer at the University of the Arts Utrecht, not an illustrator. You're straying from your path. Don't do it'. But there's also a quiet voice, saying, 'Go on, do it'.

I buy a book with brown pages. I start drawing. (*Picks up a book and sets it on the music stand*). I set it on the music stand and start playing as if the drawings were a score.

Then I show you a drawing. This one (*shows drawing*). You work for the university, too, the professorship, and, to my surprise, two days later I get a text back. My drawing has not only been seen; it's been described.

I do another drawing and send that one. Sure enough, a couple of days later there's another text. And so a correspondence starts up between drawings and texts.

I start wanting to play again (*picks up his cello*). Now my idea is to do one of your texts, about a love for the profession, out loud. For me to play and you to perform the text.

Anouk:

I don't act any more.

Bart:

Yes you do, come on.

Anouk:

I don't act any more, I just said so.

Bart:

Let's just see how it sounds, come on.

Anouk:

No.

Bart:

Don't be daft. Can't we can just try it?

Just one time...

...

Go on...

Anouk:

Okay.

Just one time.

Bart:

I was thinking about that text from our first book.

17.

Anouk reads the first piece in the little book, but increasingly starts enjoying herself.

Anouk:

If what I'm feeling is called love,
and if it's true that love fills you,
then how can I contain it with this body?
my ground is knocked from beneath me
splits appear in my body
I get too full
the pressure gets too high
it scorches
my heart burns on my tongue
words catch fire before they've even been heard
searing heat burns my lips to ash
or is it water?
am I being ravaged by water?
my heart overflows with salty tears
I drown in the words I want to cry out
a tidal wave wants to break out through my pores
I burst out of my skin
my heart
my lungs
my kidneys
everything is pushed out
leaving my skin empty
and I couldn't care less
I want to die a thousand times
to be left empty a thousand times
to be born again a thousand times
and open myself up to love again a thousand times
and let myself be filled
one day it fits perfectly
my body fits around love
one day I'm big enough to give it a home

Silence. Bart and Anouk smile.

18.

Bart starts a game of tongue twisters. They go on until Bart is incapable.

Anouk:

Well? Come on!

(Bart says nothing)

If there's something you can't say, then you immediately pick up your cello. As if you could hide behind it. Or you start talking about everything you know. You've always read a book about something.

You sniff
pretending you've got a cold
if there's something you can't say
You start talking about the weather
and again
and again
if there's something you can't say
and again
or you start talking about
something else
if there's something you can't say
You've always got something to be getting on with:
a shopping list to write
a new packet of biscuits to start
a scab to pick off
You string chitchat together
you start up
where someone leaves off
you fill up
where someone runs dry
If there's something you can't say
you stick on plasters
mute people
with iodine words
Bite on for a bit
swallow
and again
all over again
begin all over again

Bart plays.

Anouk:

You pluck fuzz pills from sweaters
cough, clear your throat
if there's something you can't say
you ask how are things
fine, couldn't be better
When there's something you can't say you're fine
and you? you ask

when there's something you can't say
You can always come up with some kind of excuse:
a backlog of maintenance chores
urgent work mails
splinters in sore fingers
You eat hot air
you wave away what bothers you too much
you scoff down whatever is sweet as pie
if there's something you can't say
you make jokes
smooth over your pain with soothing words
simply stand up
fall
and again
all over again
begin all over again

19.

Bart:

There's nothing I want to say anyway. It's easy for you to talk. About there being words that are full and words that are empty. But there's also an area where there are no words. In drawing, in music. That's where my place is. I live in music. I want to live off that fire.

Anouk:

You want to live off fire
Everything around you will be engulfed in flames.
you're standing in a rain of sparks.
your cheeks glow in the heat.
tongues of fire lick your body
flames hiss how much you love life
you're inspired
ignited
incited
you burn forward
you are that fire
that beginning
that promise
you dance in the flames
before you grow old
worn out
fed up
before the fire has burnt you into ash
the time you've got left
the time that follows
the time that comes after happiness
the time you're desperately trying to hold onto

(Anouk begins to dance wildly)

You want to live off fire
you want to dance on
you want to smoulder on
until you turn to ash

20.

Anouk:

(In the microphone)

not accepting that everything passes
not accepting that things can't stay the same
new things, not accepting
not accepting that skin is the closest you can get
dancing on
preferring to dance on
not accepting that I can't keep on holding you
or you me
ignoring thirst
ignoring hunger
ignoring exhaustion
not accepting that we are two bodies
two heads
two heartbeats
ignoring thoughts that can drive us apart
ignoring other people's voices
ignoring the laws of biology
not accepting that cells keep regenerating
not accepting that words alone can get close to what we mean
ignoring fear
ignoring sore feet
ignoring sweat
not accepting the emptiness
not accepting the passage of time
not accepting that everything comes to an end
not accepting loss
ignoring death
mocking and ignoring death
not taking death seriously and not accepting it
dancing on
preferring to dance on
far preferring to dance on
far preferring to go on dancing forever

Silence.

21.

Bart plays Bach: Sarabande from Suite no. 5
Then silence again.

22.

Anouk:

I cry, you lie next to me, and I want this to never end, and I know that crying right now will make this moment charged in a minute, and I want it to be light and airy, because happiness is a cloud before it rains, and with tears the cloud rains itself empty, and filling emptiness by myself I'm not big enough for that, even though they say I've grown the past few years, it's hard to see growth yourself, I only noticed that the cactus had got bigger when its uneven growth tipped the pot over, just like that on a Monday, I drink I eat receive sunlight I sleep enough and you can't do more than that, although I'd like to do more give more, but too much is never good my mother says, too much love that can be harmful I think then, people have died from too much love, too many words and then no one listens any longer, I found that out for myself, I've caught you glancing at the clock sometimes when I'm talking, so maybe no one wants to take on too much love, then there you are with your excess, you overflow yourself, burst at the seams, a flower pushing up through concrete is perhaps the loveliest example of too much love I think, sometimes I feel like a flower like that, and sometimes I feel like the concrete on grey days when January just never seems to end, they say January is not as long as July, but it's a lie, time only flies when you don't want it to, maybe you're old once time no longer flies, doesn't even flutter, look at my grandma's budgie, which refuses to fly even though it had all the potential when it crawled out of its egg, time is an awkward thing and I'd prefer to fill it together with you, even though that's the scariest thing, because once something has been filled it can only become emptier, the same way a parting already begins with the meeting, and that thought makes me cry, because I want this not to end, to never end, I don't like emptying full things, it's always a shame to spoil the smooth surface when you open up a new pot of peanut butter, even though the pot is just asking for you to stick your finger into it, I don't want to open us up all at once, I want each encounter to be a new pot to be opened, I want to fill my days with you without the hours becoming emptier, I don't like endings, or anticipations of endings, and you could say that about all of life that it's one big anticipated end, which doesn't mean to say that I don't love life, but it's damned complicated, I think it's better to stay awake as long as you're lying next to me, then I won't waste a precious minute, and I won't fall asleep until it's nearly morning, when you quietly slip out, because I am lying sleeping so sweetly, can you speak of a parting if I myself don't notice it, is it then perhaps only your parting, in that case you'd better go away in my blind spot then you'll still be with me even though you've gone, and gone is a strange word, because you can lose it even while you're standing over it, and I'm crying because I only want to lose myself together with you and maybe it's already over...

Bart:

Is something the matter?

Anouk:

no, nothing.

Anouk walks away and lies down on the cello's spot, facing away from the audience.

23.

Bart:

The most beautiful and the saddest story I know is the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus was the son of the god Apollo. Apollo gave him a lyre and taught him to play music. And the muse Calliope was his mother. She taught him words and poetry. So he grew up to be the singer and poet Orpheus. Since childhood, Orpheus had been in love with Eurydice. And now the day was approaching when they would marry. From far and wide they had come: the gods, the demigods and the people. It was the major event of its time. On the wedding day, however, disaster strikes. A poisonous snake bites Eurydice and her ankle and she falls down dead. The guests are shocked and Orpheus is inconsolable.

In the weeks and months that follow he looks for her everywhere. He can't find her because she is dead. Then he resorts to an unusual step. He decides to visit her in the underworld.

Taking his lyre, he sets off on his way. After an arduous journey he finds himself on the banks of the subterranean River Styx.

24.

Anouk:

He stands by the water

He stands by the water
night falls

He stands by the water
night falls
and the rain
The wind pushes him over
over and over
He waits for the ferryman
to take him to the other side
In the reflection in the water
it's raining upwards from the depths
Water that comes from the depths,
has a story
I'm reading this story
of this man
at the water's edge
at nightfall
he stand so still
So still and courageous
The rain falls
In the distance the sound of paddles in the water

25.

Anouk holds Bart's cello.

Bart:

He sings and plays. And so convinces the ferryman to take him to the other side. On the far bank he continues on his way through the underworld. Finally, he finds himself before the king and queen of Hades. He sings and plays again and pleads his case. He poses them a difficult dilemma: 'Either I, Orpheus, stay here, a living man in the realm of the dead, or I take Eurydice, who is dead, back to the realm of the living'. Ultimately the latter is chosen. Eurydice is allowed to go with him, but on one condition, says the king. You must not look round on the way back. That's easy, thinks Orpheus, as he sets off.

Arriving at the long, narrow path to the world of the living, however, he's seized by doubt. 'You are with me, aren't you, Eurydice?'

'Yes, Orpheus, don't you hear my voice? That's enough for me to be there, isn't it?'

Orpheus is reassured but, a little later, the doubt returns.

'Eurydice I have to be sure, you are walking behind me aren't you?'

'Yes, Orpheus, don't worry. But keep to the bargain. Don't look round!'

Orpheus is reassured. Then, with the world of the living already in sight, Orpheus is overwhelmed by a doubt for the third time.

'Eurydice, you are there, aren't you?'

And before Eurydice can raise her voice, Orpheus can stand it no longer. He looks round.

Anouk drops the cello. Bart catches the cello. Anouk exits with her back to the audience.

26.

Bart plays music from Orpheus up to the moment when he turns round.

27.

Anouk walks along the lines of the stage as if they were a tightrope.

Anouk:

What remains of us?

Will we be an energy still hanging around when people enter this place decades from now? Will we still be there in the creaking of the stairs? Will our rows now suddenly slam the door in the future? Will people look up with start and reassure one another that it was only a draft? Will we live on in the cracks between the floorboards, in the cavity walls and the dust on the skirting boards? Will a whiff of our desire still waft through the crawl space? Can a lovely thought nestle somewhere, like an insect? And then one day, when the time is right, fly out?

Will an echo of our words remain hanging in the rooms? And then will someone dare to say 'yes' because we say 'yes' to one another here and now? Does love last? And pain?

What remains of us?

28.

Bart:

What should Orpheus have done? Was it really so hard to keep it up right to the end? To trust Eurydice's words? Or were Eurydice's words empty? Was it inevitable that he would arrive alone? Is that perhaps why it was brave of him? Because he looked his fate in the eye? What would I do? What would you do?

29.

Bart sings and begins playing.

Anouk:

No one had told the boy
that you can only give yourself once
long ago he had laid himself in the arms of a girl
because she got on far better with him
than he himself
but one day the girl disappeared
the way happiness always disappears from stories
or stories end
once happiness has been found
because then there is no more to tell
the girl died with part of the boy in her hands
the boy, as he had been
on the first day that they saw each other

but the boy's story had only just begun
he built a body
exactly as he remembered hers
he imagined the girl
and bent the wood in such a way
that it fitted into his hands
for each of her arms a string
for each of her legs a string
four strings he could play
as once he had been able to do with her body
when he played she existed
when he sang, he could again be the boy
he had been on the first day they saw each other
long before there were words

The end