

## ROAD TO TORY, four decades in the life of William Aker \*

*I stopped to  
bathe my feet  
and drink the  
water from a  
mountain stream*

*Allan Booth( from Roads to Sato)*

### 1. SINK THAT ISLAND

Aker was born in 1938 on Walcheren, an island of 80 square miles and part of the Dutch Province of Zeeland, which has been of strategic interest for centuries. The Romans used to offer sacrifice at the Gallo-Roman Nehalennia Temple on its west coast before crossing to Britain. Napoleon inspected its 16<sup>th</sup> century Fort Rammekens, which could knock out any ship heading for or leaving Antwerp. The English held on to Flushing's harbour until the Dutch Republic had paid back the money it had borrowed to wage war with France.

Flushing's harbour is the one the Germans would subsequently need for their planned invasion of Britain at the beginning of World War II. They decide to grab Walcheren more than six months in advance of their invasion of Holland. Even after the Germans firebombed Rotterdam, Zeeland, assisted by the French, did not give up fighting. After the heart of the provincial capital Middelburg, a town with a 1000-year-old abbey, went up in flames, Aker's parents escaped with their three children to the countryside.

Aker's first memories are of waves of planes flying over the house night after night, on their way to bomb the Third Reich. The near-constant hum of Royal Air Force bombers blends perfectly with psalms sung by his religious neighbours. Without this soothing mixture of sounds, Aker has difficulty falling asleep.

The Germans turn Walcheren into one of the strongest fortifications in their 5000 kilometre

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Atlantic Wall of concrete bunkers, which they start to build in 1942. It runs from the North Cape in Norway to Biarritz in the south of France. Walcheren's bunkers, equipped with heavy guns, have operatic names like Carmen, Tannhäuser and Fidelio. Anticipating an allied landing on Fortress Walcheren, Field Marshall Erwin Rommel inspected the island on three occasions in January and April 1944.

After the landing in Normandy in June '44, the Allies badly needed Antwerp's deep-water port to shorten their supply lines into Germany. Hitler personally ordered the 6000 German troops on the island to stay put until the last bullet and the last man.

The Allies decided to flood Walcheren, planning to 'sink' the island well below sea level on the assumption this would precipitate its liberation. Within 24 hours of the warning siren, eight waves of thirty planes each, unloaded their bombs, destroying the first sea dike. Hundreds of people drowned. Three similar attacks on four sides of the island were to follow within days. Young Aker is standing in the backyard with his father, when five or six huge bombs are dropped by a British plane close to Fort Rammekens. Within a day, the water has reached the living room ceiling. (*Voor de helft een schedel*, 1978)

It was to take one-and-a-half years to repair the dikes and pump the salt water back into the sea. When the people returned, they barely recognized what was once called 'Zeeland's Garden.' The trees were dead, the houses in ruin, and the ditches full of crabs, eel, and flat fish. Brought up on the farm and with farming grandparents, Aker follows the family tradition. At the age of nine, he assists in the rebuilding, spending all his free time on the farm of Samuel, the crippled farmer, working with horses and tractors, and always armed with a rifle to keep the rabbits and wild pigeons away from the crops. (*The Dog Tax of Forty-Seven*, 2000)

## 2. KEEPING IVAN OUT

In 1956, the year the Soviets put down the Hungarian uprising, Aker signs a seven-year contract with the Dutch army upon the advice of his uncle. His mother's brother is a war hero, who participated in the first wave of the Normandy landing. Two of his uncle's sons – real soldiers with a Prussian mother – have just graduated from the Royal Military Academy at Breda. Aker studies at the school for three years, the same 16<sup>th</sup> century Breda Castle in which René

Descartes received his military training.

Around half of the military students were born and raised in one of the Dutch colonies, present day Indonesia. Most are the sons of officers or civil servants, half a million of whom, mostly survivors of Japanese prison camps, came to Holland when the colony was lost. Aker has already met many of the ex-colonists at school. They formed part of the governing caste in the colonies and have a good eye and ear for the slightly parochial features of their new homeland.

The majority of the military school's lecturers – military and civilian – are highly motivated and have a sense of humour. There is never any lack of Rabelaisian laughter in this school, where non-commissioned officers who fought in the jungles of the Indonesian Archipelago and the Korean War teach 'doing more with less.'

In military schools, students have to give 100 percent if they do not want to be dismissed – as was Edgar Allen Poe – or ridiculed by their fellow students. One out of four disappears within the first months. Aker, more a fast runner than a great soldier, takes up competition rowing and athletics, competing against military students from France and Britain, and develops an irregular heartbeat in the process that does not bode well.

As history in military schools means history of past wars, Aker hears a great deal about the famous battles of Greece, Carthage and Rome. He begins to read like mad, tries to write poetry and regularly infuriates his professors with questions they hate to answer.

At 21, he has achieved the rank of second lieutenant and makes the first of many trips to Africa, invited by Tunisian military students educated in French military academies. He sails from Marseille to Tunis, makes a stopover in Ajaccio, and visits the home and bedroom of Napoleon Bonaparte. France is still at war with Algeria, and the screening of disembarking passengers in neutral Tunis takes an entire day, for fear some North Africans have come to fight the French in neighbouring Algeria. Aker sees the country through the eyes of his young North African hosts, and he falls in love with the continent.

### 3. SHRIVELED EMPIRE

After returning from North Africa, Aker starts training raw recruits in southern Maastricht, the most attractive city of the Netherlands, and about as different from Amsterdam as Palermo is

from Rome. People in Maastricht do not bother to speak Dutch, but prefer their own musical dialect. After a year, he joins a combat-ready, infantry-tank brigade in the north of the country, with a war engagement in Germany should Ivan invade.

With few exciting things to do in a peacetime army, he applies for a place in Suriname, the Caribbean, or New Guinea, the remnants of the shrinking Dutch Empire. There are long waiting lists for these destinations. Within the year, the Netherlands goes to war to prevent Indonesia from taking over New Guinea, and his class of infantry officers has to help defend the island which is close to being lost at the conference table. Incidentally, it is at this point that his irregular heartbeat puts an end to his career as an officer in the field. A telegram from headquarters means a farewell to arms.

#### 4. WAS ERASMUS EVER HERE?

The army offers to create a job for him, which he fears will lock him up in an office for the rest of his life. Instead, he takes up economics, history, and philosophy at Rotterdam School of Economics, just before its transformation into Erasmus University. (*Multatuli, the Last Dutch Emperor*, 1974) He marries Judith, a Swedish student who came to Holland to become an actor. (*JUDITH*, part one, *The Long Journey of Camiel Planckaert*, 1986, and *Powell Street Blues*, 1991)

During his years as a student, Aker becomes a fervent pupil of Jan Tinbergen, the soft-spoken physicist-turned-economist who became the first winner of the Nobel Prize for economics. Tinbergen never turns down his students' questions. If need be he rephrases them, to give them more depth. It was due to Tinbergen's reputation and constant stream of publications in English that many a future cabinet minister and banker were educated in this school, where Aker's frequent questions were even less appreciated than in the military academy.

Since laughter is banned from economics, Aker begins to read again. Stendhal (Henri Beyle), who participated in Napoleon's war with Russia, becomes a mentor for years. As a student, Aker withdraws to a secluded farm in the forest, his 'Walden' close to the Belgian border, where he has to dig the pond himself, accompanied by his favourite dog and a flock of Java chickens. (*Voor de helft een Schedel*, 1978, and *The Long Journey of Camiel Planckaert*, 1986)

## 5. FOLLOWING THE SWALLOWS

After graduating, Aker sets off on a seven month journey through twelve countries in west and east Africa. (*Voor de helft een schedel*, 1978) He is still on the road when large sections of the novel he is writing appear in *Maatstaf*, the literary magazine of *Arbeiders Pers*, Amsterdam (1975-1977).

His writing reveals the influence of a handful of greatly admired Flemish and Dutch masters :Willem Ellschot, Gerard Reve, W.F. Hermans and Multatuli. Hermans and Reve were taken to court for things they were not allowed to write in Holland, to demonstrate that famous Dutch tolerance ultimately had its limits.

Intent on keeping work and literature separate, Aker adopts the pseudonym ‘Julien Piraña,’ honouring his mentor Stendhal. Before publication, the novel picks up a literary award. Predictably, however, four corporals of the Dutch Vice Squad – the Dutch equivalent of the Committee for Un-American Activities, and the Russian Censor during the time of Nicolai Gogol – attack it as ‘anti-literature.’ Two corporals write, and Aker is unable to disagree, that the book (or in fact the publisher) should never have been given a State subsidy, as the cover wrongly states it did. This is the first time that Aker hears about this subsidy system of great Orwellian beauty, the vagaries of which will lead to a war among Dutch writers ten years later. Aker – intrigued by forbidden books penned by authors who had to emigrate for fear of being exiled, imprisoned, hung, drawn and quartered or burned alive by some State and/or church – distrusts the State subsidy of literature. Subsidies invariably end up in the pockets of professional writers with the ‘correct’ political attitude – those who never leave Amsterdam and refuse to write a single sentence unless it has been subsidized by the Dutch State. (*Bouillabaisse*, part one: *The Philosophy of Subsidiology*, 1989)

The corporals also attack the ‘apodictic statements, fast style and lack of modesty,’ the original sin of the narrator/gardener. The Dutch language has ten times as many expressions promoting modesty as the Inuit people have for types of snow.

## 6. VINEYARD ON THE PERMAFROST

Aker accepts that the Netherlands – where the famous tulips blossom in the spring and hypocrisy all year round – is a good place to live for millions of cattle, pigs, and chickens, but the worst place for someone inclined to call a spade a spade.

Knowing something about farming and soil assessment, he suspects that living in Holland and writing in Dutch would be akin to tending a vineyard on the permafrost. Half a year after returning from Africa, and while waiting for a train in Maastricht, he jots down a full-blown scenario for a move to California, early in the spring.

## 7. THE PROMISED LAND

The great days of the confident Dutch Republic that had attracted independent and curious minds (Descartes and Locke) were gone, and there were few signs of an imminent recovery, not to mention the availability of hard drugs in Amsterdam at knock down prices. Realizing that surviving Dutch writing, fit for export like Heineken beer and Gouda cheese, had often been done abroad and in Latin, understood all over Europe and beyond, Aker sails to America on the Polish ocean liner *Stefan Batory* (*Letters from Puritania*, 1984). He intends to live there for a year, but feeling at home in California, one year turns into seven (*Journal of a Nomad*, 1989).

Craving to read the Romans in their original language, he enrolls in a summer course at Berkeley and takes seven hours of Latin a day. He discovers the masters: Saul Bellow, early Henry Miller, Nabokov, Gore Vidal, and the poet William Carlos Williams, among hundreds of others. It takes him about a year before he is able to write a simple story – *African Girl* – in his adopted language, understood by well over half a billion people.

He gives regular readings in San Francisco's main library, where men and women from all walks of life – dockworkers and fighter pilots from World War II – come and read their work at Dean Lipton's workshop and others are welcome to listen. He sets up his own workshop with a group of American writers, all willing to write without being subsidized by the State.

## 8. CLEAR VIEW OF TORY ISLAND

The following March, he sails to Casablanca from Savannah, Georgia, on the Yougolinia, a Yugoslavian ocean liner. One sunny morning, while walking the deck in search of whales, an old plan, already announced in the first novel, resurfaces. The time has come to look for a small farm, somewhere in southern France, where he might live in case he ever gives up the nomadic life. He starts out in Paris on the longest day, but cannot find what he is looking for in France. In the autumn, he discovers a farm and river in Ireland, close to the Atlantic Ocean, with a clear view of Tory Island.

The following spring he returns to San Francisco, which is to be his home for years to come, where he watches the whales and swims in the Pacific on a daily basis, often reminded of Henry Miller's famous one-liner, 'Water is soothing to the insane, just like music is.' (*Journal of a Nomad*, 1989, and *Tory Island*, 2001-2003)

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