Homesick for a Yellow Roof

Joke J. Hermsen

A house with a sloping yellow roof set against a background that is both dreamlike and dreary. We stare through the window at a dismal rainy afternoon and what else can we do but gaze through the grey-blue haze into the misty distance. But then we see the house with its striking yellow roof, challenging our gloomy view with its energetic brightness. The house in Rinke Nijburg's *Background Painting Full Moon* (2004) doesn't look all that solid and stable. It's much too wonky, awkwardly positioned, somewhat unapologetically slotted in between the hazy vagueness. The house just doesn't belong in the picture. As if it's been enchanted out of its original context. Then again, maybe in fact it isn't really there at all and we only see it when, in some forlorn and wasted moments we stare outside. Maybe it's the house that the German poet Rilke is speaking of when he says *'Whoever doesn't have a house now, will never build one.'*.

So we're left with the view. We're not looking through the window at the house. That's not how it is. Indeed. it's more the reverse. The house with its yellows and pinks forces us to look into the distance. As if every view always contains a glance back, a reference to a dwelling. As if looking outwards always implies gazing inwards.

There are other houses in Rinke Nijburg's work. The pink house in the painting *Coloured Fence* (2001) interrupts the generous colour in the middle of the picture, where the brightness is transformed into a dim, magical night complete with Christmas tree and star-bright sky. The lower section, what you might call the way towards the house, erupts into a vivid series of stripes – orange, yellow and pink; it is a patch of colour bursting with hope and expectation. This changes halfway through the painting. The house, blanketed by a thick covering of snow, marks the transition from colour to dim monochrome, from day to night, from hope to homesickness. There is the house – and behind, above and also inside – only the mysteriousness of the ink-black night. We do not see what is happening inside the house – it is curtained behind impenetrable black. Are there people and are they perhaps dreaming? The house is lonely, despite its candyfloss colours. Slightly reminiscent of Hansel and Gretel's edible cottage. Enchanting and at the same time threatening. Rather like the leaping doe inside the pink Christmas-tree decoration in the painting *Running Deer* (2004); with its

hues of blue and rose and Christmas-tree frame it seems about to capture the atmosphere of a nursery tale from long ago – but it cannot reassure us that the end will be 'happy ever after'. The painting projects too powerful a sense of doom, too much deep-blue nothingness, too much stabbing loneliness. Then there's the house in *Coloured Fence:* also miserable and deserted. Perhaps this is the place where all the fault lines join together, all the hyphens linking the things you can still hope for, the things that fill you with dread, and for which you sometimes long with all the intensity of a remembered dream.

And so we come to the large rose-red house in the painting *Ex Voto al gatto nero* (2002 / 2004). We see a woman, her arms round the neck of a black cat, falling from the house. Or rather, she is toppling down, maybe floating down – for she appears quite elegantly occupied and we have no inkling as to whether she'll actually reach the black ground below. Perhaps she'll remain forever floating between the house and the distant ground. Why has she jumped out of the top-floor window? And is it the same aperture as the one in the painting *Al gatto nero* (2004), where we see a window hacked out of the centre of a purple-grey wall, and where once again the view pulls our gaze into an enticing scene suggesting hope, with small dabs of light and dark beneath a sultry sky. Perhaps the woman who leapt from the window was suffering from a paradoxical longing – to enjoy both colour and darkness, to experience both the feeling of coming home, and at the same time of the *unheimlich,* a sense of eerie foreboding. So the question is – was the woman overcome by homesickness, and is that what made her leap into space? Did she have to jump out of a window in order finally to reach home?

Homesick. Nijburg's paintings often suggest feelings of homesickness and desolation. According to the 18th-century philosopher Kant, the phenomenon of homesickness was most intriguing. He wanted an explanation for his observation that almost every German soldier of his day seemed to be suffering from massive symptoms of homesickness. It reached epidemic proportions. Sleeplessness, loss of appetite, not to mention loss of fighting spirit; an overriding sense of apathy overcame these men – just imagine trying to win a war with soldiers in this condition. But as Kant saw it, the soldiers weren't so much plagued by an irresistible longing for home, as by an incurable nostalgia for their childhood. A most remarkable suggestion. Maybe the generals should have sung lullabies to soothe their world-weary troops, or poured

sweet hot cocoa into their billycans and brought them bowls of strawberry ice cream. How far do you have to leap forward or backward in order to regain your childhood, or – to cite Rilke again – *die Kindheit wieder zu leisten*?. How many houses do you have to build? How many panoramas and houses do you have to paint? How often do you have to look out through a window? Because the longing for home and the longing for distant places, both of them an ache and a sickness, are more closely related than might appear at first glance. The moment you gaze into the distance through the window – a home, a house, springs into sight.

Homesick: it may well be the desire to do away with borderlines, the barriers that we had to learn how to perceive when we were children, the demarcations that we grew up observing. First, the boundaries of a room, then the garden, then a house, and later on the boundaries between oneself and the other, the borderlines imposed by language, by custom and habit, by regulations and requirements. Without these boundaries we would never have learned to talk, would never have survived; nevertheless, they caused a separation between us and the world and thus created a feeling of homesickness, a sense of having been abandoned. At the same time they filled us with the longing to reach beyond the boundaries. Because from the moment that children begin to talk and begin to experience themselves as having a distinct identity, from that point on, suggests Rilke, they lose their initial immediacy with the world. 'Dieses heisst Schickahl / gegenüber sein, und nichts als das und immer gegenüber.'[i]

For some people homesickness is closely linked with the longing for distant places. For instance, some schoolchildren may be on the annual day's outing, rolling along in the hired coach; they are not dreaming about their homecoming – rather, they gaze fixedly out the window, imagining the place towards which they are travelling. Generally the school outing ends up in a ruined castle, or a National Trust park enclosing a stately home – but wherever it may be, for some children it is a place of enchantment, a promised land. At least, that's what it was throughout the journey, all through the wilderness, until they actually arrived.

The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (born 1947) has written the first philosophical study of homesickness, in his book *Sphären* (Spheres) (1998/1999).[ii] He has chosen to take exactly the opposite route from that of classical western philosophical tradition;

that is, he decides not to move forwards any more, not to place one foot in front of the other – no, he saunters cheerfully in the other direction. He prefers the nostalgic path. In other words, he dares to travel the unlit roadway, ever darker and more difficult to discern, back into early childhood, to the first beginnings, the long journey of being born, and even back beyond birth. He leads our adult life by the hand, taking it to the most obscure and hidden sources of the inner world that lies buried deep inside us, built upon our very earliest sensual experiences.[iii]

The quest, as he himself admits, has 'by definition the form of a mission impossible, and we can neither complete it, nor give it up.' The quest is a courageous attempt to recount the epic story of something that lies irrecoverably buried in our memories, the source of our melancholy longing for another place and another time, yet which, he says, 'has never been irretrievably rooted out'.[iv] He wants to write the history of something almost forgotten, the tale of human prehistory, the story that precedes our emergence into the social and linguistic establishment. Sloterdijk wishes to do nothing more nor less than reveal the drowned continent. But what method should he use to do so? He plans to be 'more tolerant than is normally the case in systematic discussions' and he will only carry out 'non-invasive invasions'; he won't, as it were, kick the ball straight into the goal, but will dribble around in circles, turning aside down many suspect side-alleys; and he will let the language of logic have a holiday.

The book about the work of Rinke Nijburg was initially titled *Losing the Spirits of Homo Sapiens Sapiens* (2005). And this is exactly what Sloterdijk planned to do. He wants to uncover and dig underneath the knowledge, the knowing, the forces that define and rationalize. He wants to (re)discover something we seem to have lost irrecoverably. The book is an eruption of ideas, of images, of language. And an eruption of countless bubbles, the foam beneath which our Atlantis, our drowned continent, our *temps perdu* lies hidden – or so we *suspect*, though we can never be quite certain.

Interestingly, many of Rinke Nijburg's paintings are surrounded with bubbles and balls and circles. The circle outlines the recurring figure of a person squatting, elbows supported by the knees, staring at the ground as if surmising that unsuspected vistas are to be seen there. Like the figure in the gouache *Dragon Ball* (2001). Similarly, in *Ying Yang Elephant* (2001), a figure gazes fixedly at the ground; he appears to be relieving himself and desperately hoping that as he gazes below a final message of

truth will appear inside the white circle into which he stares. Then there is *The Ventriloquist*, painted in 2004, holding a white disc resembling a shooting target, his mouth a round black circle, a silent darkness – for language, tongues, words are too weak to recount the stories about the indescribable and invisible Atlantis.

`To be able to look into the only darkness that we encounter,' writes Sloterdijk, `isn't something we can practise in another darkness. Whoever dare confront their own monochrome black soon come to realize that life is something far more intricately layered than an individual autobiography. The written word never bores deep enough into one's own blackness.' We are not able to set down in words who we were originally – and who in fact we still are. We have to become ventriloquists.

Sloterdijk's quest is not so much in order to define 'one's own blackness', as to help us understand the baggage we are carrying. We bear our half-forgotten childhood, a surplus of memories and experiences that we cannot clearly recall, yet it is precisely this baggage that preserves in us a semblance of elasticity. That stops us from growing stiff and inflexible. That retains a little spring in our step. The only way to get that spring going is to maintain a small distance from the lives we are living – to cherish certain homesickness. This introduces space, room for interpretation, the opportunity to change, to grow, to take off. Then we can become not only ventriloquists but children again – or rather, bubble-blowers.

The child who blows bubbles is coming to terms with the realization that things in the visible world do not have a soul or spirit, and do not have an inner being. They are 'dead, lifeless shells', things to be destroyed, thus abolishing the feeling of being different, of being an outsider. Sloterdijk's magnum opus *Sphären* (Spheres) opens with the description of a child 'standing shivering on a balcony and gazing after soap bubbles'. Some children have just blown a cloud of bubbles into the air and 'as long as the bubbles floated, the children were ecstatic, as if the continuation of the bubbles depended on their being guarded and guided by concentrated attention. The bubbles slowly burst, and on the spot where this happened, the soul of the bubble-blower, which had left the child's body to fly with the bubble, hung for a moment solitary and abandoned, like someone who'd set off on a joint expedition but had been deserted by their companion along the way. Because the soap bubble becomes a wondrous exciting instrument in which the soul is stretched. The child playing happily is granted an almost incidental revelation – which will later be lost and forgotten during the

tedious hours at school. The lesson is that the soul, or spirit, even inhabits space in its own manner. But who remains faithful to their childhood vision, once they have quit the nursery? And who directs the young brood into the world outside, on the path towards the things that really count in life?'

Beside this passage, Sloterdijk sets the mezzotint *Bubbles* by G.H. Every, after a painting by Millais. He could equally well have placed Rinke Nijburg's painting from 1993, *The Bubble-Blower*. Indeed, it is remarkable how often Nijburg's work establishes a visual dialogue with, or possibly a prelude to, Sloterdijk's work *Spheres*. Our lives, Nijburg too seems to be suggesting, take place in an outside arena, like those of the children in his paintings *Cold Turkey* and *The Birds.* In these works we see an introverted figure, seemingly resigned to his lot, seated upon an upside-down washtub, with just a couple of dark telegraph poles behind and some skyscrapers in the distance. The children have been pulled into the outside and now they live cut off, separated from the world – their only company a few birds and the occasional mermaid. They appear to be carried, supported by that outside, but just the same they don't lose hold of their own dim inner world – they keep it with them. Truly, they have experienced an exodus, for they have been driven out from their first home, snatched away from that warm and wholly natural embrace, ripped out of that oneness they enjoyed with everything around them. And after their first house, as Rilke concludes in his *Eighth Elegy*, the second home seems cold and equivocal.

Who or what accompanies the silent, resigned figure in Nijburg's paintings? Is it perhaps the white birds, capable of restoring contact with the world? Or do their flapping wings only serve to usher in the fear of loneliness? Are the birds perhaps a kind of pure souls? Do they represent that other part of the self to whom we have said an irrevocable farewell? But who nevertheless always remains present within us, like a footprint, a sign, a longing, like the beat of a bird's wing. Because that 'other' may be invisible, but hasn't completely disappeared. As if a human being has always been two parts, a kind of double-figure, a pair of twins, a recognizable self and a forgotten 'other' who is part of that self. The person whom we once were, and the person we have become.

One of Nijburg's pieces from 2001 is titled *Soul Mates* and suggests such a double being. An appealing creature, with a dark and a light countenance, united in one body. Yet each one faces a different way, one looking forwards, the other

backwards, irrevocably separated and at the same time inextricably linked. Similar is *Double Zappa*, from 2001, an intriguing painting showing two swaddled figures lying beside each other on a bed covered in white sheets, the scene once more enveloped in a circle – or is it the crinoline of the woman who is observing them? They lie over each other forming a cross, intersecting each other, as it were, where hearts and stomachs meet. Here they mix and mingle, flow into each other – but their extremities lie quite separate, distant, without contact.

It wasn't until the close of the Middle Ages that there was any need to blow soap bubbles, opines Sloterdijk. Contentedly, we hung within the bubble that God had created for us, safely laved by his breath, which banished the chilly nothingness from the universe; a spirit that animated and inspired. The world of humankind was like a soap bubble created by God, hanging – if you like — from God's chin , or his beard, if we are to believe Hildegard von Bingen's representations reproduced in *Scivias*, one of which Sloterdijk includes in his own book. Cosily enclosed, people lived comfortingly surrounded by the looping spheres and warmly wrapped in heavenly robes.

In Nijburg's painting titled *The Creation of Adam* (1997) we see a baby lying on the ground, surrounded by circles. The umbilical cord rises vertical into the air, just as in the painting by Von Bingen, but in Nijburg's case it would have a long long way to go before it reached Heaven. Indeed, it appears that God has snipped through the cord. No longer is the baby supplied with heavenly nourishment. The Internet link to God has been cut off. The umbilical cords that appear in Nijburg's paintings blossom into fancifully-formed and – once again – ball-shaped flowers. Beside baby stands a coffin. It isn't clear who this is for – God or the child.

Because it is finished. The bubble has burst. God's almighty, iridescent bubble, that until the waning of the Middle Ages floated protectively around us. It has burst and spattered upon the stones of academic scholarship, information and rationality. The tube that automatically shunted divine nourishment into the human soul, has irrevocably broken. And from that time on people no longer live within a safe sphere, rather, they dwell on the surface of a sphere. A sphere like the purple one in the painting *Cold Turkey* (2001), or the grey, slightly slanting shape in the painting of *The Birds* (2002). And to live today, suggests Sloterdijk, means we must pay the price for having no protective shell or casing. We are like vulnerable chicks, just hatched, who stare around in astonishment, asking, 'So what's all this about? Why's it so cold here?'

And who is capable of covering and wrapping up these poor naked wretches, and protecting them against the cosmic cold of the vast unending Nothingness?

We have rubbed out God's horizon, wrote Nietzsche at least a hundred years ago, but in so doing what exactly have we called down upon ourselves? What breath is there to fill our lungs with now, what spirit to lead us? What bubbles can we climb inside today? All we can do is blow bubbles ourselves – which is what Nietzsche realized. He explained that `when you find yourself no longer surrounded by the divine, you have to create it yourself.'[v] You do this with art, or, most likely, with love. You create experiences that, for a while at least, banish the feeling of desolation. For a moment we are back in the exhilarating world we had lost. And who knows – perhaps from time to time a pair of white birds murmur something incomprehensible into our hearts.

Both in Nijburg's visual work as well as in his texts we observe that he wants to merge various motifs, styles, stories, traditions and images and build a new cosmology –bursting with diversity yet not indiscriminate. `On the one hand I'm looking for a system that makes sense of everything, something like what you have in the old myths with their ambiguous stories,' explained Nijburg in the summer of 2004. `On the other hand I'm quite simply a child of my time, trying to live with an ongoing neurosis and a reality that has – once and for all – been exploded. This explosion has firmly finished our delusions about those high-minded stories and systems. So what are we left with? It's clear that a quixotic attempt to interpret the world isn't merely entertaining – in fact it offers the only hope of avoiding falling into a pointless waiting for a black hole that will swallow up all matter and all light.'[vi]

What to make of all this? We walk around in the outer world laden with 'a dowry of memories' as Sloterdijk puts it. The work *Sphären* sets out the case for remembering we have this dowry; though he cannot describe the treasure in a very concrete manner, either as a philosopher or as a spherologist. Indeed, he has something in common with Arthur's knight Sir Percival, who when he finally saw the Holy Grail itself, was speechless, not knowing what to say. Words fail us, so what do we do but conjure up a white archery target, to divert attention from that black hole, from the bottomless pit of dumb speechlessness into which we might fall, in the same way that Nijburg's *Ventriloquist* is threatened with doom. Sloterdijk is a philosopher following the tracks of the black darkness, of that something which once was. Writers, musicians and artists

do the same. It's not surprising Sloterdijk surreptitiously slips so many illustrations into his book – by Piero della Francesca, Grünewald, Magritte, Hildegard von Bingen, Jeroen Bosch – because pictures can express what cannot be said in words.

And he could easily, as suggested above, have added a painting or two by Nijburg. Because if ever there existed a highly-charged connection between being a child and being homesick, between a godforsaken sense and toneless black, between the realization of living on a sphere and the sheer joy of blowing a nostalgic bubble – then it is in these paintings. We look outside and see a house. But the house is buried too deep in our memory for us to grasp it. That's why we paint it yellow. A sort of clue. Or rose-red. That's why we jump out the window – you have to burst out somehow. But something manages to seep through, to break through the codes, the rules, the conventions of both past and future. It is a voyage of discovery that, almost magically, we watchers tumble into; both a summons from outside and a peering inwards. 'On this journey through the evasive underworld of the world within,' writes Sloterdijk, `like a map with sound effects, the watery image of a universe slowly unfolds, woven entirely from resonances and floating fabrics.' These words could well be a description of the work of Rinke Nijburg.

Translation Wendie Shaffer

Rinke Nijburg - *Piercing the Spirits of Homo Sapiens Sapiens, A Cosmology in 144.000 Images*, The Netherlands, Arnhem 2005, pp 154 – 165.

[i] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegy*, the *Eighth Elegy*. '*Dieses heisst Schicksahl/ gegenüber sein, und nichts als das und immer gegenüber.'*

[ii] Peter Sloterdijk, *Sphären*, (1998/199) (Spheres). The citations are from *Part I, Bubbles, microspherology, The allies,* or: *The inspired commune*; translated from the Dutch.

[iii] For a more detailed dialogue on Peter Sloterdijk's work *Spheres*, see the novel by Joke J. Hermsen, *De Profielschets* (The Profile Outline) Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers 2004; available in Dutch only.

[iv] See also Rilke, the *Eighth Duino Elegy*.

[v] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämmtliche Werke*, part X. München 1980, p 32.

[vi] Cited from one of Rinke Nijburg's requests for subsidy in connection with this book.