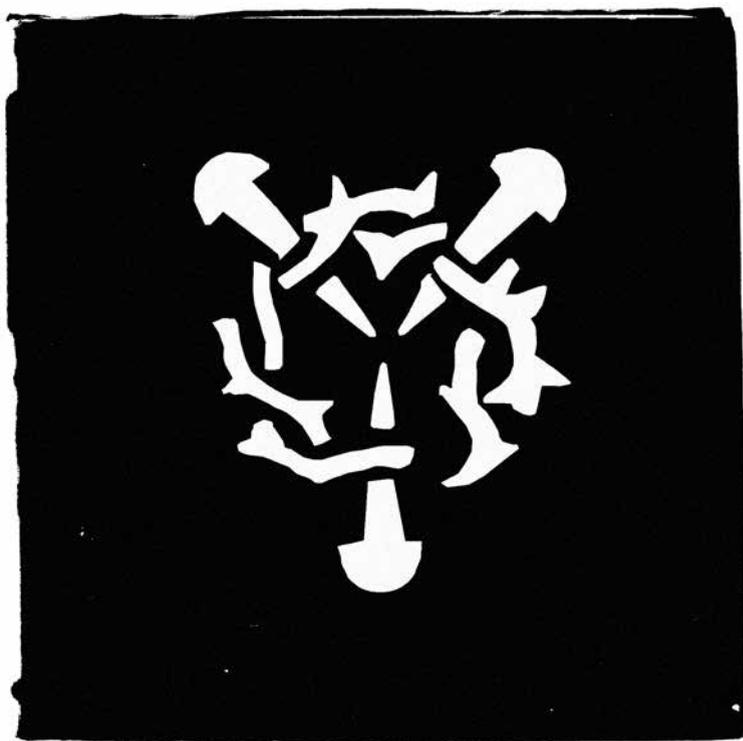


The sweet scent of the sugar industry hovered above the town. A never-ending stifling disease. Above the little rivers and drainage channels of industry hung a pale mist and whenever the wind blew over the wintry fields it became stuck in the alleys of Root Town. There it eventually filtered into the houses. Close to the industry, the dirty pulp waste piled up in mountains of foul-smelling filth. From a hole in its walls, a trail of bleached pulp was extruded as ropey white sickening mucus, as if the industry itself had become unwell from the horrible smells that it had produced.

The people from Root Town did not oppose any of this, because they accepted it as a side effect of their prosperity, as a result of introducing the industry – just as a medical doctor becomes impervious to the distasteful pathological phenomena that are a normal development in any disease.

From *The Root Town Clerk*
original title *De Griffier van Peewijk*
by A.H. van der Feen alias F. de Sinclair, 1910



WORLDWIDE FOREST.COM

By
JAN PUYLAERT
&
ILIA CHIDZEY



tuttibooks

Nijmegen, Helsinki, Porto Valtravaglia,
Gold Coast ~ Queensland, Rotterdam

MMXIII

TIME HAD PASSED AND CHANGED so much that the place seemed strangely unfamiliar. By now industrial progress had taken over in a gradual battle against what was left of our countryside. Not that any outsider had ever seen or understood this beauty. The decay seemed obvious to me. It was where I grew up, and had been my hometown for many years. It was the place that I escaped to in my mind when I needed shelter from my ever increasing moments of fear. Looking out of the taxi window as I made my way back home, I didn't recognize the streets. Many of the houses were collapsing and others now lay empty. The street was riddled with holes, and weeds were growing through unused bricks. It was surreal. The murky grey water of the industrial canal that had followed my trip for miles had something deadly and sinister about it. It always had, I remembered. In fact, this very canal was created when the industry began. It had been dug without any respect or consideration for the trees and natural environment that surrounded it. It created a straight line

of toxic polluted water from the nearest city to the sea, disrespectfully cutting through my hometown.

Industry, or maybe I should say civilization, had always been my greatest enemy. It may sound strange, but I believe progress has caused more harm than good.

I definitely needed a change from my previous city life, but being confronted with what my hometown had become was causing me great distress. If not for any other reason, this home coming had made me articulate the many confused thoughts that I had been having lately.

There it was. The house. My old home! It was enormous, even bigger and more imposing than I remembered it. Its huge entrance was impressive. With stairways on both sides, you were reminded that you were entering an exalted area. Each room or angle was marked with its own specific detail. Whatever it was, from a wood-carved finishing or a cast-iron flowery fitting or even the light filtering in through the colored mosaic glass, it re-awakened vague memories. The 1920s architecture had left an imprint on my life, so that in many ways I had never un-

derstood modern housing. Contemporary places seemed empty to me. Not worthy of being called a house, let alone a home. Maybe for others, but not for me.

I have never understood people who live in apartments. The collective society that results seems unrealistic, like life in the big cities. Nobody seems to know each other or be connected to a particular house or place. It is a transient way of living, impersonal with people so closely packed together that life becomes an ant hill, inhuman almost.

This house on the contrary seemed proud, with a protective personality. Now that I came to think of it, not one of the places I'd been to since had left an impression quite like it.

How sad it was to see it all empty and alone.

Are you Paco?

You must be! How nice to see you after such a long time.

We wanted to inform you sooner, but nobody knew

where you were. Let me show you these last letters. It is so nice to see you. Your brother Charles is coming soon. I spoke to him this morning and his plane should have arrived already. It must have been quite a trip for him too. You two are very difficult to track down.

The sudden death of our father had been the reason to look for us. Very few of our father's friends were left, so those who were, almost felt like family to us now. After such a long time, it was a relief to see them, how they still cared, as proof of our peaceful past.

It was as if we had seen each other yesterday. Charles hardly said anything, just a glimmer of an approving smile. He immediately started working in the garden. Clearing up the mess that had piled up in the past years, as he shouted what I should do. I think it was his way of getting over the loss of our father. It seemed natural and as it had always been.

Charles was a true farmer, and although he had spent the last sixteen years in New York, living life as a

neatly dressed businessman, this farmer in front of me was his real self. We hadn't heard much from him. Life in New York, as I imagine, is crazy. Cars and huge buildings is all that is there, a coating of human-made pollution on our beautiful world. The few suppressed trees you find in every so many side streets are more like the ultimate sign of what had once been, rather than any positive sign for the future. Charles didn't talk about it, but I could see from how rapidly he adjusted back into his farmer's style, that it was just what he needed. As for myself, I still was searching for who I really was. Not a businessman like he was, surely. Too creative to be that. A designer or architect? Maybe. I never understood the difference. In the past years, I had designed so many things that I could hardly remember. Luckily it was the last thing on my mind. All I wanted was to return here, and so here I was.

For years, I had been travelling from one city to the other, looking for work, following leads to find new chal-

lenges. But the more I developed my profession, the more I felt design and architecture have not gone forward at all. Today's cities are about money & work, whereas yesterday's cities were about life & people, and so was design. Once, every single house had an entrance door that had been designed specifically. Door handles and hinges were designed to fit the building in a harmonious way, and all the windows were decorated with deliberately chosen colored scenes in stained glass. It still had a human aspect. Nature was part of these cities because rivers still passed through them. Cities were actually built around these rivers, where trees and animals were an essential component. Nowadays, we create artificial lakes to brighten up the scenery, in the same way plastic flowers do inside our homes.

Later that day, the notary was as clear as he could be:

There is no other family left.

Your father left you and your brother the farm.

A farm? What farm? What about the house?

The house was included in a deal with the industry. It will be knocked down with the rest of the street next week. Feel free to take out all you want before the demolition. It is yours after all.

That was all? Just like that our whole past would be wiped away? I don't remember our father like that. Of course years had passed, and we had been far away, busy with everything but this house, but to let it be demolished? Curious, but overwhelmed by the tragedy of the situation we left the notary's office. Back in the house, we looked around once more. Our father must have been through some really bad times lately, because it seemed that he had sold everything. Nothing remained. As if nothing valuable or worthwhile had been left. In fact, it seemed as if it had lost its value to him rather than he had needed the money.

We took our backpacks and all that we came with and headed for the farm.

A farm? Our father had never spoken about a farm. Of course we knew all about our farming ancestors, but whose roots didn't trace back to a farm?

The taxi driver left us on the corner of a remote area in the middle of nowhere just outside Root Town. It was raining a bit. We could see it. It lay there, in a chilly mist, far away in a field of overgrown vegetation. The entrance had a pillar at each side of the fence with strange stone-carved 'symbols', and a name: The Black House. The location was terrible. All you could see for miles around was industry. The exception being a sad little farm next door.

The Black House was a nice 17th century building, simple but honest brick architecture containing all aspects of the human era. It was probably worth very little, but neither of us was thinking about the value of the property. Our father had died and with him our entire family story seemed to have vanished. This strange place certainly did not make things easier, but it was peaceful and that was all that really counted.

Charles checked the old plough that lay in a half col-

lapsed barn. It looked medieval to me, and I wouldn't know where to start. It was a horse plough, so he was going to need a horse was the only thing I could work out.

Was that a horse neighing I heard? I jumped back in shock. A scary old man appeared out of nowhere with an enormous grey-colored Flemish draft horse next to him. I don't know much about horses, but I didn't know horses as huge as this one existed. I could see his strength as he stood proudly, looking down upon us subordinate human beings. He had no fear, only dignity. He was only peaceful and protective.

The old man, we figured, was the owner of the little farm next door, and must have been the last survivor in the area as surely no one else lived in this semi-industrial, grey, deadly and polluted outpost. He didn't say a word. He just stared. From behind his dead eyes, he seemed to be asking himself one question: what on earth are these two city guys doing here?

Charles seemed to be more in tune with the strange man. Neither said much, but with rudimentary sounds and signs, they got along just fine. And while he sorted out the plough and the horse with the neighbor, I entered the house.

It was cold and there was no light, so I lit a fire in the enormous fireplace, which was as high as a man and as wide as a room, using some branches I found just in front of the farmhouse. When the fire took off, it lit up the back section that was covered with a cast iron plate. Emblazoned on it was a symbol, like a family crest. It looked familiar to me. Had I seen it in pictures, or heard about it in stories? My grandfather used to tell us stories about his grandfather who had once lived on a farm. In fact, our grandfather had been a great storyteller. He could spend whole evenings telling family stories and tales about his grandfather, and what a phenomenal botanist he must have been. If I remember correctly, our ancestor had been experimenting with bio-genetics long before this field of science even ex-

isted. He had been an inventor, who had created mirror tunnels with empty wine bottles to capture the sunlight and turn it into a laser beam of sorts. He not only mixed seeds, as other scientists did, he exposed them to this self-made laser to try to provoke mutations that might have led to quicker growth. He had spent his life trying to discover the origin of life, and had been obsessed with how cells, even simple ones like plant cells can still suddenly split open, after many years of dormancy, and force their own growth. He always said it was the plants that were to take over this planet in the end, not mankind like many people claimed. The place, looking around me, was filled with symbols of little plants growing, just the way grandpa had always told us.

Then I suddenly realized I actually was in the original, authentic farm, where my great-great-grandfather must have experimented with his seeds. The place where our family's origins lay hundreds of years ago.

It must have been the one property that our father had saved and protected for all these years so he could give it to us.

A strange feeling remained. Why? Why never tell us about it? Maybe something had gone wrong? Something he should have told us? Something that we should have known about, but somewhere along the road was forgotten? Knowing my father, there had to be a reason behind it. Why had he never told us anything about this place? And since it had been of no use to anyone, why had he kept it for all these years? I felt there had to be a reason, a message, a treasure maybe?

Before we knew it, weeks had passed. We arranged a worthy statue for our father's grave and finished the paperwork to legally file our father's death. What kind of a world had we created? Where a person cannot even die without bureaucracy. Without much of a choice, we decided to stay at our farm. There were beds upstairs under the roof, and an oven in the kitchen. There were

← BACK HOME →

also fireplaces to keep us warm. We adapted to this new lifestyle. We were proud and it felt good to be here.

