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## grass snake

# I'm not here

I love taking a nap in an empty box that keeps me warm, somewhere amongst the junk. That combination of peace and rough surroundings is more and more difficult to find in crowded Amsterdam. No lack of junk, but peace and quiet... So, I increasingly go to the edges of the city to find a spot to nap. The best spots there have already been claimed by the grass snakes and their offspring. They like to slither around the dykes where they can hide for their winter naps. They love nothing more than to bathe in the sun, enjoying the peace and quiet. For instance by the Diemerzeedijk.

*They do their very best to convince me they're dead and inedible.*

Here, east of Amsterdam, was once the site of one of the largest landfills of the Netherlands; the citizens of Amsterdam came here to dump their rubbish for years. Now, the contaminated materials have been packed underground, and a layer has been applied to seal in the old waste. Flowers, bushes and small trees grow there now as if it's always been a lovely nature reserve. It's certainly a location with a special history and a pretty complicated user manual. Nevertheless, the polluted no man's land transformed into a city park with its own wildlife, including the grass snake. They're not social types, these

small reptiles, they prefer to be left alone. The only exciting activity in their life is when the female is impregnated by multiple males in an orgy of slithering snakes. And then all is quiet again. Afterwards, the eggs flourish underneath the city's rubbish where the temperature is just right. Here, they're safe from the frogs that love to eat the young snakes. Perhaps revenge for the fact that adult snakes enjoy a tasty meal of tadpoles themselves.

Humans are often a little creeped out by grass snakes. Admittedly, they're not exactly the fluffiest of animals, but they're not poisonous to those littering bipeds, they've got nothing to fear from these creatures. These snakes are shy and a bit sluggish, even in case of an immediate threat they rarely make the effort to bite. Their laziness goes pretty far. It doesn't happen often, but when I encounter one of them in a warm place, they most resemble bad Hollywood actors. They do their very best to convince me they're dead and inedible. They open their mouths, let their tongues hang out and even let a little bit of blood drip out. To make things even worse, they spread a smell of decay that even makes me sick. Poseurs. But still, I would prefer to sleep it off in the sun after an intense romantic escapade too, if I'm perfectly honest. And I also only get up when absolutely necessary. Perhaps I should take up acting.



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*american crayfish*

# Eat it!

Sometimes, when I walk past a restaurant, I hear loud shouting. I take a minute to look, because you don't want to miss a good fight between two bipeds. Upon closer inspection, it's usually just an ordinary conversation. 'O MY GOD! THAT'S AMAAAAZING!!' echoes through the streets. That tells me all I need to know, Americans are talking. Whether they're tourists or expats, they all behave the same way. Loudly, they take their place. Adapting is not something they do well. They are who they are, decibels and all. In exceptional circumstances, they speak a few words of Dutch and are incredibly proud of that. Just pronouncing Amsterdam correctly is often already too much to ask, they never get it right. Usually, they're quite friendly. Particularly when they squeak 'OH, SOOO CUTE!' as I cross in front of their yellow rental bikes. They come with many, and their nasal intonation has now become the official language of most tourist locations in the city. Not that Americans always like that. They'd prefer to be guided to spots 'only locals' frequent. Weird.

Nowadays, the waters of Amsterdam are also inhabited by Americans, albeit a quieter type. These armoured creatures crawl around the bottom of the Amstel river between the bicycle wrecks. Sometimes, they waddle out of the water, looking for a better spot. For instance, when there's too little oxygen or food. About three years ago, these American cray-

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fish were first spotted in the Dutch ditches and lakes. Now, there are hundreds of thousands of them and they live everywhere in the country, including in the city. They first had to win their place in the increasingly complicated food chain of city life. They've succeeded brilliantly, perhaps their position has even become a little too dominant. Together with their friends, they devour the plants in the ditches and canals, and now certain plants and other lifeforms are threatened with extinction. They cause damage to the banks of the ditches and canals as well.

I like to look at them, particularly their funny walks where they parade through the streets in a backward motion with their young underneath their tails. What can we do against this excessive American presence? The solution is very simple. Culinary-minded bipeds love to eat the little creatures. The only way to keep things under control is if the local chefs start serving American crayfish in their creations. They'll certainly score points in doing so, because connoisseurs think they're delicious. Fancy hotels like the Amstel hotel already have them on the menu. And Amsterdam citizens cooking their own meal only have to get off their bike to catch them and serve a distinguished entrée for their evening dinner. That is, if other gourmets such as grebes and herons don't beat them to the punch, as they also enjoy a nice crayfish.





# Masters of the universe

Birds have their own hunting grounds. Well-filled nests are often located in inaccessible places. Such as the roof of a bank's headquarters. Here on the Zuidas, you can find these luxury nests stuffed with fat eggs. Sometimes, there's a scattering of green and blue rings that used to be on the feet of carrier pigeons. These are the remnants of a meal of the flying master of the universe, the peregrine falcon. The pigeon keepers await the return of their personal hero in vain, but there's only one real champion. Because peregrine falcons are the world's fastest birds. With dives of approximately 360 kilometres per hour, they chase award-winning carrier pigeons. Even faster than high-speed trains. Any bird that come into his sights, is done for. In flight, the peregrine falcon bites off its prey's head in one fell swoop. This head often drops into an office's courtyard, in between bank employees enjoying their lunch. Not exactly a pleasant experience. I, on the other hand, do greatly enjoy a lunch surprise falling from the sky.

The king of the firmament prefers to nest on the roof of the tallest bank building. He looks smartly dressed, with his black chest, pointed wings and a short tail. On the bank's façade and logo, the peregrine falcon collects the remains of his victims. Below, the other masters of the city are working, also with

immaculately groomed hair and a professional look. Equally smartly dressed in their fancy outfits, they come up with new strategies to make money. They never have the time to pet me. No matter how much I show off, they don't even see me. These powerful bipeds are busy living and surviving, very quietly. Outside, the lamenting screeching of the bird at the top of the food chain can be heard. His prey are the common folk among the city birds: duck, pigeon and sparrow. And if the peregrine falcon is really in top shape, he can catch a fat goose. The victim is both elegantly and ruthlessly grabbed and subsequently lovingly presented to the nest full of young peregrine falcons.

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Inside the towers, a different kind of common folk is hunted. There, the targets are needy entrepreneurs, home buyers looking for mortgages and hungry investors. Within these shiny towers, only the cleverest survive. They bring home a generous bonus to their spacious nests in Zuid or 't Gooi. One can only hope they can find time to pet their purring cats.





## pike

# Paradise

*They're scoundrels that  
will even eat each other  
when given the chance.*

The overcrowded city is a veritable paradise for greedy humans. Between the hordes of tourists, students and loud citizens who, slightly intoxicated by the smell of pot, infest the small alleyways, these sinister creatures seize their opportunity. With prying eyes, they locate their target: the latest iPhone or a wallet. Seconds later, they manage to nick the item from the pocket of the unsuspecting human. No one is safe from these hunters. If they get the chance, they even steal from their colleagues. Sometimes, I want nothing to do with the crowded places where these types roam. I flee to the Rijksmuseum across the Museumbrug bridge to find myself at the Hobbemakade, situated along the Boerenwetering. The only function this body of water now has, is to access to the city for recreational boats. Apart from that, it does nothing more than glisten in the sun, giving you an instant holiday feeling. You can often see holiday-goers on boats, holding a glass of Chardonnay, glancing sideways at the scantily-clad ladies of the naughty Ruysdaelkade. That's about the only exciting thing going on there. At least, if you ignore the floating gardens.

These floatlands were put there by the municipality to improve the water quality and appearance of the bare quay walls. The residents have since maintained the islands and clear them of as many wandering cans, chips containers and

blue Albert Heijn bags as possible. The floating gardens have become part of the local cityscape. They meander hundreds of metres across the canal, as if nature has placed them there itself. In winter, not much blooms and they're mainly collections of waste and rubbish, looking rather shabby. In the spring, they become little pieces of paradise. Those funny, elongated floatlands turn into tiny Gardens of Eden, with all manner of plants and animals living on top and beneath them. I can look at them for hours, if only for the swans, ducks, coots, moorhens and grebes who build their nests here where they lay those tasty eggs. Unfortunately, they're impossible for me to reach.

Underneath the floating gardens, even more is going on. Fish, crayfish and oysters live there. If I stay long enough, I sometimes see the fin of a pike emerge from below the surface of the water. Those slippery blokes enjoy a bit of hunting, to catch fish, but also smaller coots and ducks aren't safe. Sometimes, their prey simply swim into their open mouths. ucky bastards, I haven't yet had the fortune of having a mouse walk into my waiting mouth. But, those greedy pikes occasionally bite of more than they can chew. Regularly, one of them kicks the bucket because it fails to swallow its fat prey. It can't let go either, due to the position of its teeth. A little sad really, to meet your maker in such a way. But, we don't have to pity those scoundrels. Because they will even eat each other when given the chance. Young pikes are plentiful in unpolluted waters, hidden among the plants. That's why they like to hide underneath the floatlands. Underwater paradises, but in the age after that human Adam tasted the forbidden apple.





# Commuters

Although I'm a true local these days, my ancestors didn't hail from here. About 9,500 years ago, cats mainly lived on Cyprus. My ancestors slowly travelled with their masters to other places, including the Netherlands. By now, I live in this country with nearly 3.6 million fellow cats and I can say I've assimilated very well. In that respect, I feel a certain connection with the other veterans of the city, like the city pigeons. They too have become an integral part of Amsterdam, even though they originate from far away. Long ago, they flew with the soldiers from ancient Rome to the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Now, they populate the city's squares and streets by the thousands. Just like us, we've got a special bond.

Wherever I go during my walks, the city pigeons flock to where people are. Just like I do. Particularly the bipeds holding a sandwich can count on a following of these birds; they trot after them and wait patiently for the crumbs to drop. Even though they clean up the mess, they're not exactly appreciated. I sometimes tolerate a pet from a human in the hopes of getting a little something to eat, but the city pigeons aren't that lucky. They can't get so much as a kind word. If they're lucky, a child will try to play with them as they still love everything that flies. And that's all they'll get. Now, I can't complain about my looks, but personally, I think

*Without buying a ticket,  
they follow other passengers.*

pigeons are fairly good-looking as well. Humans clearly see this differently, they call them flying rats.

The thing I admire most is their courage. Especially when it's a little quiet on the platform, the city pigeons won't hesitate to take the tube, like true commuters. And they don't disembark until they've reached the city centre, the perfect feeding location. Without buying a ticket, they follow other passengers, through the turnstiles and up the escalators, to find their way to the Dam. Where humans often look a little peeved when being fined for fare-dodging, the pigeons always get away with it. Respect! And that's not all; I've noticed they're aerobatic pilots. You might not think so, as they can appear a little sluggish. But they're not and can even fly straight up, something few other birds can do. They've inherited this trick from their ancestors who still had to fly up against mountainsides. Thanks to this handy skill, they can delay getting out of the way of a bike or car. They only rarely get crushed; at most, they might miss part of a leg. I've long since given up on ever catching such a tasty, muscular treat. Too quick, too handy, too clever. They're bright rascals, but are hardly ever seen as such. Good workers who labour each day to provide for their offspring. Like real commuters, they travel back and forth between their nests and their place of work.





## A quicky

The narrow streets of De Wallen, the red-light district, are some of my favourite spots. There's a special atmosphere, I get more attention here than anywhere else. Often even more than the girls behind the windows. To prevent hungry men or curious tourists from tripping over me, I get up a little higher. Somewhere on the windowsill of a bar, I observe my surroundings while almost every passer-by tries to pet me. Sometimes, I'm really not up for it. Although I'm open to contact, I won't just let everyone touch me. That's not my cup of tea. I first want to check if the human is okay; I set the terms.

*The females fly by the males and choose their partner in flight.*

I enjoy the crowds and all those lights, the bustle and particularly the treats everyone keeps dropping on the ground. Not one of those swarming people actually belongs here, they are here for one thing and one thing only. The tiny Wallen inhabitants that mysteriously swoop over the bustle are likewise temporary and are there with the same purpose. In the narrow street surrounding the Oude Kerk, you can see their shadows fly by. Initially, they look like birds, but upon closer inspection, you can see they're acrobats who speed through

the air. About forty thousand bats have made the red-light district their home. They live in old attics and gaps in cavity walls of old buildings that are abundant at the Nieuwmarkt. They like sultry locations, preferably near water. Bats catch about 3,000 insects per night, including those annoying mosquitos. Busy bees, they are.

On De Wallen, it's about seeing, negotiating and getting down to business. It's all quick and efficient. That's no different for bats. It just works the other way around than with the windows. For them, it is the males who offer themselves willingly and the females who fly by to pick the best ones. In flight, they choose their partners. In this feminist world, the females are the ones in charge and the lovemaking is over quickly. Mating season brings the bats to De Wallen in September and afterwards they leave again. They hibernate in the dunes, for instance in old bunkers dating from World War II. Their goal has been reached, they can rest.





# Truckers appetite

Marjan is one of the sweetest women I know. Her café is situated in an impersonal, industrial area, somewhere in the western ports. The ambience in the café is the exact opposite, it feels like a warm blanket. Lorry drivers love to come here after a long drive. It's a busy coming and going of lorry drivers of all nationalities who take their loads to faraway destinations in cold harbours. The mood is friendly, the guests clearly feel at home in this calming environment. If people speak at all in the café, it's in a strange Bargoens language interspersed with titbits about clever routes, unfortunate malfunctions of the lorries, beautiful women and, of course, football. The drivers spend the night in the parking lot next to the café.

Marjan is a blond woman whose clothes remind one of different, more youthful times. Loneliness always lies in the shadows waiting for her guests and Marjan fights it with all she's got. She knows the rough edges of society and has learned to love them. She shares her warmth and it's not just the drivers who've noticed. A fox has become one of her regulars. This wild predator came and went, just like the drivers. He was a night owl. Apparently, he trusted Marjan, she was the only one who managed to feed the fox sausage.

*This wild predator came and  
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I too had gotten used to his visits and his proud expression. We greeted each other with a respectful nod. That was all, we never did become friends. To be perfectly honest, his teeth were a little big for me.

And then it was over, he stopped coming. What happened to him, no one knows. When one of the regular drivers from Portugal, Poland or the Ukraine has failed to turn up for a while, the café guests respond exactly the same way. For a time, they don't notice, until they suddenly miss him. Then they start asking questions. Was he assigned to a new route? Did he become a cab driver? Or did something bad befall him? It remains a mystery, he's simply driven out of their world. And now, the fox is missing too. Did he find a better place where they give him more sausage? Or was he turned into roadkill by a lorry? For his sake, I hope the first, but I don't feel very optimistic about it.







# Outcast

The tidy chaos in the ports always puts me in a good mood, it's nice with all the train tracks, warehouses and cranes. Humans are busy working, goods from all over the world are unloaded. Sometimes for a very brief stay, to almost immediately continue their journey to exotic locations. Suddenly, I see him by a huge wall of stacked yellow containers, a shaky black kitten. He looks really young. I've seen him before, but where? Or does he just remind me of those shabby bipeds you see roaming the streets in the city centre? People don't seem to notice these outcasts, like they don't exist, even though I clearly see that people spot them from the corner of their eyes. You can practically see them think: they're beyond help. Hopeless, as the general public usually judges them, all help is wasted effort. Is that also true of this red kitten? Was he born wrong and therefore won't make it?

And then I see it! Or rather: I smell it. It's one of the kittens I met last week while roaming the abandoned warehouses nearby. They were all lying outstretched drinking milk from their resolute mother. It all seemed fine, if there had been humans, they would have fought over these little furry friends. 'Aaaah, they're adorable,' you'd hear them say. I must say, they were pretty cute, even if his brothers and sisters all looked more or less the same. This kitten had something special. It gave me a cheeky look, stopped drinking and walked up to meet me.

What happened to him? I carefully crawl closer and nod. Although I'm fairly certain he's seen me, he doesn't look at me. He tries to run away, but to no avail, his legs give out. I stand next to him. 'Do you remember me?' I ask. He is startled, but recognises me. Although we only saw each other for a few minutes, we both know that we have the same repertoire of mischief. It almost as if I'm looking into a mirror when I catch his sardonic grin. But then, his gaze turns inward again.

*His brothers and sisters  
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I need to do something! I leave the little fellow on his side and assess the damage. He tells me he wanted to pull a prank with his brothers and sisters. He'd hidden behind a stack of cans with gherkins for a restaurant. When he jumped out, they all fell on top of him. He heard something crack. From one moment to the next, his life changed completely. No one laughed at his jokes, no one could do anything for him. He was alone in the big city. Perhaps, he won't make it anyway, but still... I don't know why, but Sabine pops up in my head out of nowhere, a sweet human, the exact opposite of the shopping masses in the Kalverstraat. Then, I hear myself saying something strange: 'Come along, I know someone, she'll fix you right up.'







