



# Dimitri Verhulst

## Reports from the Void

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Several years ago, out of the blue, Dimitri Verhulst began writing a diary he could not share with anyone. Reports from the Void is an account of self-annihilation: better to run

yourself into the ground than let someone else cut you down. Fear of the moment when his own life will be snuffed out triggers a lonely trek from one bar, drug dealer and empty hotel room to the next. He flees down every back alley he can, until we arrive at the root of his fear. Even his diary turns out to be an escape, though he only sees this after the fact. Reports from the Void is a harrowingly honest book in the tradition of Jeroen Brouwers, Charles Bukowski and Bohumil Hrabal and lays bare a writer as he does not want to be seen. But above all, this diary is a declaration of love to Tutut.

### **Praise for *The Harvest of the Plums*:**

'A glorious tale of the splendour of love.' – *De Morgen*

'With complete assurance, Dimitri Verhulst draws the reader into his trap.' – *De Groene Amsterdammer*

**Dimitri Verhulst** (b. 1972, Aalst) has written novels, short stories, poetry, essays and plays and is one of the most highly regarded writers in the Low Countries. He has been awarded almost every honour that can befall a writer in the Dutch-speaking world, not least the *Libris Literature Prize* and the *Golden Owl Readers' Choice Award*. His work has been translated into over twenty languages and 2019 saw the publication of his novel *De pruimenpluk* (The Harvest of the Plums). In 2015 he was invited to be the face of Dutch Book Week, the Netherlands' annual celebration of all things literary.



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## Reports from the Void

Sample translation

[Pp. 9-12]

Louise,

Friday night in Frankfurt I was buttonholed by a Dutchwoman, otherwise unknown to me, maybe someone from publishing. I got the feeling she'd been watching me for a while, knew who I was and had seen her chance to finally get me by myself when I stepped out of the bar for a smoke. She'll have introduced herself, but the name didn't stick to a single one of my brain cells. She asked me why I was so self-destructive – to the point – and added that it was a shame for a man of my talents to be making such a single-minded, flamboyant attempt to live himself into the grave. There was no point in laughing it off, she genuinely seemed to have my best interest at heart. She said she could smell my downfall – on my breath, on my skin. It's possible. My father, too, reeked of his own downfall for a couple of years before he finally wasted away for real, and I don't mean his breath stank of alcohol, which it did. At a certain stage, death itself starts

panting out of our mouths, sweating through our pores. I knew what she meant, I knew those smells, which you immediately recognise on someone else but never yourself, and she was right. I'd been through a week of much too heavy drinking, buckets of gin, and I had impressed some of my fellow writers with the tirelessness I like to brag about. I had pulled an all-nighter and was well on my way to spending a second night without seeing my bed. And this when they'd given me an excellent hotel for once. At the Hauptbahnhof, I'd bought my fifth gram of coke in two days from a filthy dealer who wearily admitted that I knew the prices and dragged me to a sex shop because he didn't want to hand stuff over on the street. We closed the transaction between the wankers and the peeping Toms. The station was full of pathetic junkies, toothless creatures, malnourished, far beyond the point of no return. They were ready to suck off anyone to still their hunger, swallowing the stickiest of wads to score some drugs. There was a moment I thought they'd taken up position there on purpose to let me see myself reflected in the dull look in their eyes. Because although I was still combing the streets in a fancy suit, they saw me as an equal. Big-city dealers everywhere recognize my nature, they pick me out immediately, there's no use trying to fool them. The metropolitan substratum

no longer mistrusts me in any way – I've come home. There's no dress code in downfall, the stinking homeless realise that.

Yeah, why am I destroying myself? Because I've got nothing else to say. I'm empty. It's over. And because I severely question the talent that one woman claimed for me.

Less than an hour after the conversation with this concerned, kind-hearted lady, I found myself in a toilet with another woman, thirty years young and seriously beautiful, not there to fuck like couples in toilets would be better off doing, but to make two lines on the screen of my phone, then greedily snort them. Toilets, where the shit stripes were still on the bowl, the tampons chucked on the floor next to the bin, the discarded condoms that remind us of the urges of others not even tied off, and where I had suddenly taken up residence. The party I was attending, on a boat on the River Main, was supposed to be trendy. It was sultry, sex was in the air, strangers were sticking their tongues down each other's throats, and I was bored. Three gin tonics later I was still bored. And when I was still bored after the fifth glass, I left, on to the next bar, Bar Roomer, in the middle of town, where I had already spent three or four nights that week among the yuppies. Magnums of champagne, cocktails galore, physically perfect girls that were traded like monetary units by mafia types with impressive physiques, muscles built up with

speed-driven workouts. I found myself completely unable to get drunk, no matter how much I poured down my throat, and suddenly it hit me: the feeling of being broken. Finished. I wouldn't have given a fuck if I'd dropped dead on the spot. I was no great loss, I was sure of that (and still am). There was no self-pity, just the realisation that I had reached rock bottom. Night could no longer seduce me, there was no more love on my part, and maybe night itself no longer loved me either.

A bag of cocaine had ripped open in my pocket, white powder everywhere. My phone, my bank cards, my money, all covered in coke. My snot tasted like petrol, the street value of my hankie had shot right up. In my hotel room I used my health insurance card to sweep the crumbs together and chop them up. A last line before bed, as pitiful as I was. Waking up again was completely superfluous. You wouldn't admit it right off, but you would have been so happy if I had closed my eyes for all eternity. Now you're still willing to shed a tear on my behalf.

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Three activities that reveal the path to beauty to me: filling a pipe, stacking wood, writing a poem. All three, if taken seriously, are extremely tiring, but if beauty's what you're after you have to go

that extra mile. The art of the pipe has not been granted me. Plus the combination of pipe and poem is a tad too cosy. Poets with pipes: mistrust them! I did, however, for many years, fell, split and stack my own firewood, which was a source of great aesthetic pleasure and also backache. As a city-dweller again, but one who's become attached to the smell of smouldering beech, I ordered a pallet of wood ahead of fickle winter. They dumped it in front of the house with a forklift, after which I had to lug the already nicely-dried wood inside, and on the double to keep the traffic chaos in my much-too-narrow street to a minimum. I feel less manly with these prefab logs, of course, but I can't help that. Anyway. While I was hoarding my winter warmth, a homeless person came by and said, in a Ghent accent that had me licking my lips and which I can't reproduce phonetically here:

“Goodness, that must have put you back!”

I hadn't found it too bad: 265 euros for an impressive amount of top quality firewood, delivery included. I had even calculated my profit on this order, because setting to work yourself with an axe and a chainsaw is no cheaper, and definitely not when you add in the expense of new vertebrae. The joy with which I had begun stacking my easily purchased wood turned into a kind of shame. Me, a parvenu, a nouveau-riche snob, with

my smart stove and a wallet that lets me have the woods delivered diced and dried to my door.

But it's true: the value of warmth is best expressed by the homeless.

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[Pp. 40-41]

I wanted to return to these pages this week to write how happy I am that everything is going well between Louise and me again. There was heavy weather, it blew a gale, but we came through it. That was special: I'm not in the habit of dragging my relationships through storms. But look, we're together, which is nothing short of miraculous, and maybe we're on a more solid footing today than ever before. I bathe in her love, which she pours out over me from thousands of buckets at once (untrue, she's acting, but I'm more than willing to play the part of docile audience). I no longer feel any embarrassment about receiving that love, I dare accept it, no guilt feelings stop me from enjoying it.

But still I sank into a deep, deep trough this afternoon, unlike any I'd been in before: a depression. Although I would

never apply that word to myself: depressions are for other people. I don't partake of that foolishness.

Depression is a disease, it doesn't need reasons.

This in contrast to unhappiness.

But still. The grave was the only way out. Nothing but emptiness inside of me. And I know why. Because I stayed up two bloody days and two bloody nights drinking like a cod and snorting coke like a vacuum cleaner, all extraordinarily festive, of course, and when the bag of coke (large) was empty, I started crushing rilatine tablets in a mortar to sniff them up too. How low can you sink - voluntarily pumping a methylphenidate through your body? I looked it up today and yep, that crap has suicidal tendencies as a contra-indication. I've felt them, those tendencies. They were lurking inside of me and I'm only walking round here now thanks to details. The simple presence of a nearby railway line that morning could have easily led to the ordering of a cherry-wood coffin.

It's enough, and I've realised that for months now. It's enough, and I can't change that. I have to get out of the city. Away from the immediate temptation of the bars I love so much. It's not as if I'm living life to the full.



[Pp. 80-82]

It could be cancer of the throat and the way I've been smoking and drinking again the last five years it should be cancer of the throat. A little lump somewhere in my gullet, the kind of thing I mostly feel after swallowing, like a ball of slime I should be able to just hawk up, but the muck won't budge. And even more alarming: my vocal chords are affected. I've always been a bit of a hypochondriac, but it's not as if I make a swelling out of every spot. And, of course, the facts are clear and bald: it says on the packs that it'll kill you and these last five years I've been smoking like a crematorium again, combined with quite impressive volumes of alcohol, alternating with coke now and then. Plus: very little sleep and a disdain for fruit and vegetables. Plus: a genetic predisposition to addiction and cancer. All of that together and you're playing hard and fast with your health. You have to look death in the eye and step up to the chopping block with your head held high. But I'm not that brave. Last night I was overcome by an immense sorrow at having recklessly ruined everything. Thinking of my daughter, who is now the same age I was when my father got throat cancer (my faith in numbers is stronger than my miserable results in maths might have suggested). I'm not ready to die, it's inconvenient right now. I don't have time for death, sorry, I have to love Tutut for a long

time yet. Now that feeling is back again. And Tutut doesn't have time for death either, that's why her MS tests came back negative and her symptoms turned out to *only* be caused by the herniation of four cervical vertebrae. Crap, total crap, but no death sentence.

I'd like to surrender my agnosticism and beg God to please give me one last, really, a final, very last chance.

For once, I haven't touched a single cigarette for almost twenty-four hours. No alcohol either (though I'm less concerned about that). It looks like I've broken with my beloved coffin nails. When I was thirty-three I managed it, driven by the same hypochondria and my love for Rosalie. I started again seven or eight years later when she fucked a fat, ugly, empty-headed postman behind my back. But all the reasons I ever started smoking again are null and void and have been for a while now. For once, I seem to even believe it myself: I've given up smoking! And if my throat complaints reduce now too, if something more or less benign in my gullet would care to start healing... Because I'm not ready for the verdict.

[Pp. 85 -88]

Pianists play Brahms's *51 Exercises* to keep their fingers supple: they have to keep up their scales daily, otherwise the real work

will end up being a dud too. Maybe that's why writers keep diaries. Beer mats, scribbled memos that might very occasionally include something worthwhile.

Tutut has given me a fountain pen (for Christmas! I've been a good boy!), a left-handed one that must have cost her quite a bit. She knows I like to write old-style by hand, after all she sees me at work on my new come-to-nothing novel in one of those once again trendy leather Paperblanks. And maybe the fountain pen will compel me to a slowness that is even more intense than the one I enjoy with the ballpoint. We'll see. First I'll have to overcome my boarding-school years, when I was forced to write with a pen and when I, a lefty, kept smudging the page, to the great displeasure of my sanctimonious watchdogs, often getting lines and a tug on my ear as a result.

I will write her love letters with this pen. And I will post them to her the way you should. If there's anyone who deserves my love letters, it's her.

She's lying on her sofa at home, downed by a stomach bug, the dog by her side. She managed one bite of the carrot cake I baked for her yesterday, but couldn't keep it down. She did better this afternoon with rice and some leek soup. And all the time apologising for the miserable state she's in, the sweetheart.

No, I fear love letters are no longer being written. And although I'm fairly confident I'm poor at the genre, I long to practise it. Why? Surely not just for the exercise? Wouldn't that totally diminish the person you're writing to?

Yes!

Plus: happiness is best written about in the past tense!

Flaubert's love letters may be wonderful reading material, more so for me perhaps than who they were written for, but they remain scales. Finger stretching. I don't believe them. Just as I seldom believe writers' letters. They are affectation. Pure wank. These gentlemen (more often than ladies) don't write letters to someone; they slop together a volume of letters, and it shows.

Maybe I want to write myself into Tutut's arms for when I'm no longer here. The thought, in all its banality, of me having died and her reaching for the box with my letters. If she forgets how much I loved her, if the emotion has faded, she'll find and feel and relive it there. Selfish somehow, I know. Writing to keep loving her so that she can continue to feel loved by me. A love that transcends my existence.

Translation by David Colmer