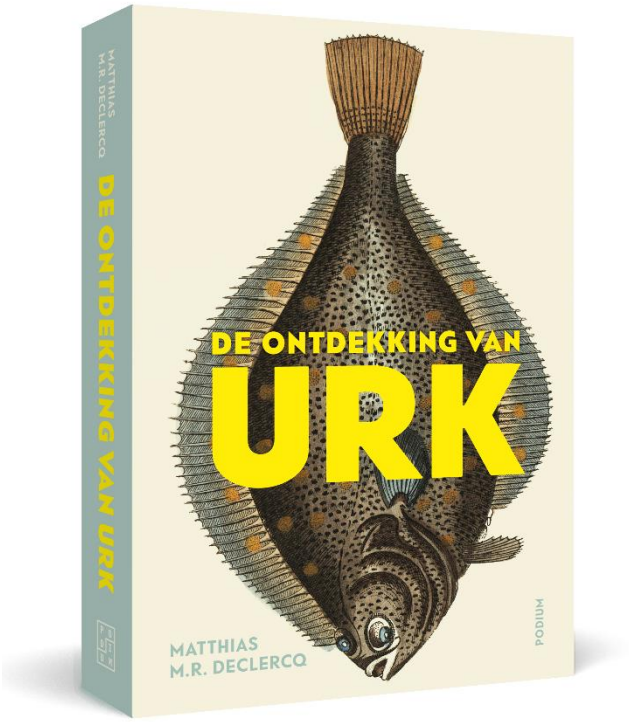


Matthias Declercq

The Mystery of Urk

One traditional fishing village, two opposing realities

Literary non-fiction – 328 pages – Publisher: Podium – October 2020 – Translation Rights: Bee Rights – English sample translation available, German exposé available, extensive press kit available – featured by Flanders Literature*

AWARD WINNING * BESTSELLER * 45,000 copies sold

Urk, once an island, is a fishing village where a close-knit religious community is fighting to preserve its way of life, fending off the outside world. There are two sides to this mysterious 'Asterix' village. Nowhere in the country has more churches than Urk, the houses are picturesque, and the people are warm and welcoming. At the same time, the villagers are deeply distrustful of government and turned in on themselves. In the lee of their religious convictions, drug dealing and violence prevail. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed some additional features of the community: anti-vax sentiments, conspiracy theories, curfew riots, and faith in God rather than science. Is all this a logical outcome in a conservative, reactionary community? Is it actually possible to remain unique in our global, rapidly assimilating world, and at what price?

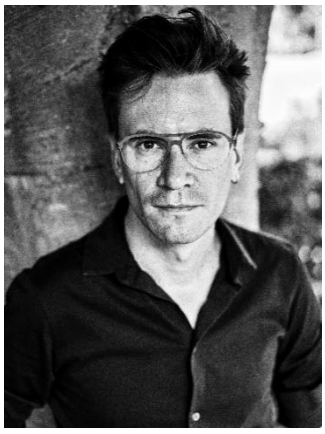
Writer and journalist Matthias M.R. Declercq, not Dutch but Belgian, neither religious nor familiar with the Dutch Bible Belt, was sent to Urk for a day in 2009 to report on a

murder. He found the village so fascinating that ten years later he decided to do what he had not succeeded in doing then, namely to get to the bottom of a closed community that is unknown to the outside world.

Declercq lived in Urk for almost a year, a stranger at the heart of the village. He accompanied the villagers as they fished, prayed and drank. Little by little, reality emerged. Declercq saw an amiable and god-fearing people, but he also discovered a tragic, shadowy world of youthful mayhem, seafood fraud and drugs. Keeping an open mind at all times, Declercq succeeds in revealing the true identity of that world, which harbours huge contrasts and where nothing is what it seems. As Declercq puts it, 'In due course, my network in that village grew to such an extent that I got to know the dark side of its distinctive culture. That meant daring to name and explore its darker aspects in order to draw a complete picture of the community. Not a polished image, but the reality.'

In his own respectful way, Declercq exposes the friction that can be caused by a strictly religious way of life and a lack of a culture of openness and dialogue.

Matthias M.R. Declercq (b. 1985) is a writer and journalist. He made his debut with *The Fall* (2016). *The Mystery of Urk* was published in October 2020 and quickly became a bestseller. It has been awarded the Confituur Prize by the book trade and De Loep, a prize for the best investigative journalism.



Press:

'The way the author manages to gather the wealth of information he comes across into animated and gripping chapters ensures you'll keep on reading. Faith, drugs, criminality and the stubbornness typical of Urk combine to form a mix that we see reflected in the latest news about curfew riots, about churches packed full during the pandemic, and from time to time about a fishing profession that is steadily dying out.' - **Jury of the De Loep Prize 2020**

The Mystery of Urk penetrates deep into the mentality of a community where time stood still. Declercq writes with great empathy about the tough lives of the fishermen and about the 'wrath of God' that can be felt everywhere. He shows how generations clash and how Urk, as Asterix's village did against the Romans, is mounting proud and stubborn resistance against the ever-advancing twenty-first century. - ***Het Nieuwsblad***

Matthias Declercq strips the village to the bone, without ever acting the self-satisfied intellectual. - ***VPRO Gids***

Author Matthias Declercq leaves nothing out of account in *The Mystery of Urk*: the macho culture, drink and drugs, vandalism and incest, the lack of any self-cleansing capacity, the hidden tragedies behind closed doors. But he also richly describes the good aspects, in beautifully written passages. - ***Nederlands Dagblad***

In his book, Declercq, affectionate and merciless in equal measure, lays the village bare. [...] *The Mystery of Urk* reads like a swirling 360-degree portrait, throwing all the windows wide open for once. - ***de Volkskrant (2020)***

A fascinating book about all the many facets of this stubborn and closed Bible village. [...] His approach is reminiscent of documentary maker Louis Theroux, who often manages to open up the hearts of strangers with his non-judgemental and slightly screwball stance. In this Belgian, with his strange accent, Urk has found its own Theroux, who has thrown the village open to the rest of the world - ***Tzum***

Sample translation

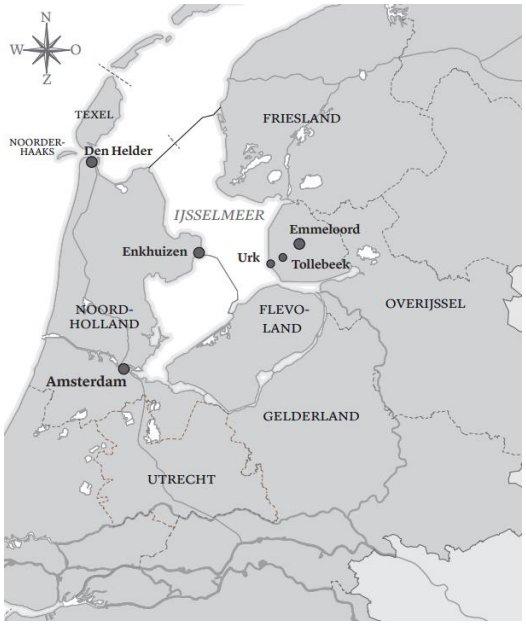
[pp. 19-22]

For centuries, Urk, a small island in the Zuyder Zee, fought the water that nibbled at its natural boundaries in every storm. Urk was right in the middle of the sea, as if nobody wanted anything to do with it, keeping all the coastal villages at a distance from its 'peculiar people'. Its lump of boulder clay stood in a watery no man's land, twenty-two kilometres from Enkhuizen to the west, twenty-two from Lemmer to the north, twenty-four from Kampen to the east and fifty-eight kilometres from Amsterdam to the south.

The Urkers were originally farmers, when the island consisted mainly of meadows. But with much of their land steadily disappearing into the sea, farmers were forced to become fishers. It was not until around 1700 that the island assumed the shape it would maintain for many decades, after the islanders built a sturdy palisade. Urk was a mere pocket handkerchief of dry land; you could walk round its eighty hectares in less than an hour. The island served as an important navigational beacon in the Zuyder Zee. The villagers kept the fire lit day and night, so that merchant ships could orientate and avoid running aground on the sandbanks. In 1660 Amsterdam, grown to become the most important port city on the Zuyder Zee coast, purchased the island, the

property of various noble families for centuries, so that it could develop the beacon further.

'The IJsselmeer is a lot more placid than the sea used to be,' says Rinke, zipping up his coat. 'The storms are nothing in comparison, far calmer, although it can still get pretty rough here. A lot of sailors are afraid of this bathtub. It's never lost its wild character.' I'm now sitting right in the stern of the *Sylt*, focussing on the horizon and swallowing as often as I can. My stomach is churning like a washing machine, my head too, and although I feel a degree of excitement at the prospect of putting in at the village, I'm also longing for the mainland, if only to be shot of this miserable yawing. 'The storms may be more under control than before, but the price was high. Urk lost its livelihood.'



In the early twentieth century the Netherlands decided to shut off the Zuyder Zee and to drain much of it. Saltwater became fresh once again. In 1914, at the outbreak of the First World War, the Netherlands ran short of food as international trade froze. A new polder would be insurance against future shortages. Two years later, when the Zuyder Zee flood of 1916 swept across the land, the die was cast. The dikes broke in dozens of places. In the province of North Holland nineteen people drowned, while another thirty-two died at sea, and at Monnickendam the body of a man with a child in his arms washed ashore. Zuyder Zee sailors watched roofs floating by and saw bedclothes, wardrobes and sofas in the water. The Netherlands declared war on the sea. The Afsluitdijk was completed in 1932, a 32-kilometre dike connecting North Holland with the province of Friesland on the far shore. Ever since, this body of water has been cut off from the North Sea, like a child separated from its mother. The seawater grew brackish as fresh water flowed in from the River IJssel, gradually turning the Zuyder Zee into the IJsselmeer, and the Dutch built dikes in the water. Huge pumps drained parts of the IJsselmeer and on what had once been the seabed, a whole new

province was created, called Flevoland. Urk was at the edge of the new land. The village was no longer an island. The new polder reached to where Urk once lay in the middle of the sea.

In many former Zuyder Zee villages the fishing trade died out and people moved further inland. The housefronts remained picturesque, old fishing smacks still lay at anchor in the little harbours, but the fisheries were no more. Many villages became open air museums, and the traditional costumes, having lost their cultural significance, acquired economic importance by attracting tourists.

The fisheries of Urk survived the draining of the polders by turning to the North Sea. Urk always remained an island in the minds of the locals, and indeed the rest of the country. With its innumerable churches and extensive fishing fleet, it became a kind of relic of past times, a place still regarded as having all those things that other villages had lost long ago.

'Nobody knew what to do with us then, did they?' says Rinke. 'Not even after the polders were drained. We were allocated hardly any farmland, so we just carried on fishing.' The village became part of the province of North Holland, then Overijssel, before finally being incorporated into Flevoland. Its timeworn folk culture, its ancient crafts, the smell of fish: none of what Urk stood for was in keeping with the new, peerless society to be built in the new polder. Over the next few months I was to hear the joke several times: What's green and travels back in time? Answer: the bus to Urk. For the government, the village, that scrap of the old Netherlands, that ancient lump of land, was a pebble in its shoe.

We're making good speed. Like my face, the water is changing colour and starting to make a different impression. Behind us it shines in the sunlight, with a silver-blue gleam so bright that it hurts the eyes, lighting up the IJsselmeer as if in a tourist brochure. Ahead of us the clouds are gathering and starting to obscure the sun. Towards Urk the water takes on a dull, moss-green colour. Drab and turbid. Exactly the way I feel.

What have I let myself in for?

'You know,' says Rinke, looking vaguely ahead, 'the fun was always elsewhere. When I was a child, we used to visit relatives in Enkhuizen sometimes, during the summer holidays. It was great. I saw people working in their gardens on Sundays. Working on a Sunday! There was even a funfair in the village. I couldn't believe my eyes. Now that we're on our way to Urk I find myself thinking back to those days. The closer we got to our own village, the more I felt judgement approaching. You sense a thing like that as a child, how people judge you in everything you do, and how God is always watching, especially on Sundays. Now I don't feel that any longer, at least not to the extent that I used to, although a residue of it has stayed with me. Whatever I'm doing, on Urk I always have a kind of justification ready, a story, in case anyone challenges me. I hope you can inspire in people the courage to tell you about that. Because it's there. I know it is.

[pp. 45-52]

In the morning the sea is still black. On board the UK165, a shrimper, life reaches only as far as the lamp shines. Beyond is nothing but noise. Seagulls and waves. *Lummetje*, the boat is called, and it's on the North Sea to hunt for shrimps destined to end up in scooped-out tomatoes and thick soups. The little boat is crewed by just two men: Jochem Foppen, the captain, and Hendrik Jan de Vries, his partner, a boy from a family with fourteen children. They cast their nets one last time, because they have to. 2019 has been a lousy year. The fuel price is high, the catch low and the weather keeps tossing a coin: spring tide this time, and the remnants of a sou'wester that swept all the fishing boats off the sea like a broom. *Go home, the stove is lit*.

The boat is close to the harbour at Den Helder, where Jochem and Hendrik Jan are about to land and sell their catch. The pair know each other well. For years they've been on the same boat five days a week, and Jochem always reads aloud from the Bible.

Before setting sail, he places their fate in His hands. For the UK165, this is one of the last fishing trips close to the Wadden Islands, for this year at least. In winter Jochem steams on northwards, across the Wadden Sea into the German Bight, where Germany gives way to Denmark. At weekends the cutter will lie in Cuxhaven, while Jochem and Hendrik Jan drive nonstop back to Urk by car.

Jochem Foppen's family has become one with the sea. His father taught him to read the North Sea, and with him his cousins, nephews, friends and colleagues. *Yes, there in that bay, yes, just you try it*. As a child Jochem dreamed of speed; he planned to crisscross the country as a lorry driver, with bananas from Ecuador or kiwis from New Zealand, tooting loudly when he got back to the village in an empty truck. He's still a member of the Urk vintage car club. He has a lockup garage in the trading estate, a 'fishers' box'. The nets are repaired there, but it also houses his red sportscar, a Porsche 924 from 1981, and beside it a Tomos moped and a Suzuki motorbike.

Yet Jochem chose the sea. Or did the sea choose Jochem?

One day he went out on a cutter. Just for the one time. A teenager he was then. Intrigued by all the stories his family had told him, he went aboard with a captain he knew. The sea was calling him. When he got back to Urk he tapped his father on the shoulder. 'Dad, I'm going to be a fisherman.' Twenty-five years later, the father still tracks his fishing son, as he's doing now, at home, laptop in his lap. On the screen Foppen senior sees the tiny dot of the *Lummetje* slowly moving across that great blue expanse.

Jochem's father sold the UK165 in those days with a heavy heart. He survived three heart attacks and remained on shore. The UK165 was a different boat then, not a shrimper as she is now. When Foppen senior sold the cutter, he was reluctantly putting an end to a long-running family story. That really got to him. He missed the water, because the sea had brought the Foppetjes, as the Urkers called them, everything: fish, morality, the good life. They had always rolled up their sleeves. In the history of the Foppetjes you can read the history of Urk. The wooden boat became a steel craft, the old sail a noisy engine, and the houses got bigger. All thanks to the North Sea: *Ex Mare*

Gratia. That was the name of the boat grandfather Foppen once sailed, Willem by name, along with his eldest son Klaas.

In old photographs grandfather wears stained blue-grey overalls, his hand on a basket of flatfish. There is pain in his eyes, in a body tanned by the sea. Facts from those times are now stories and legends that live on in sons and grandsons. They cast their nets, because grandfather was a fisherman, father was a fisherman, uncle was a fisherman, and there are plenty of shrimps in the North Sea.

In late January '66, grandfather Willem Foppen and his son Klaas set out onto the North Sea with a crew of three. The cutter was equipped with a beam trawl, made of two steel beams, one on each side of the boat, that dragged a net across the seabed to scoop up flatfish: sole, plaice, dab, brill and turbot. Suddenly all radio contact was lost and for days no news came. Fellow captains went in search. They found nothing and suspected the nets had caught on a wreck and pulled the boat over. On Urk, Jochem Foppen's grandmother had lost her husband Willem and their eldest son Klaas. Left with nine children, she threw up her hands to heaven: *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*? My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?

Five years after the cutter's disappearance, a good friend of grandfather Foppen fished up a piece of driftwood, as often happens at sea. He pulled it out of the nets. *Gratia* he read on the broken name-board. It was all that remained of the lost boat. Grandson Jochem's father rarely visits the Fishermen's Monument. He avoids the names carved in marble there. The pain is too great. Nobody will ever know exactly what happened to his father and brother. Did the net really get caught? Sometimes Jochem's father looks at the sea and thinks back to those days. And with every boat that is lost, the scar troubles him again and the memories bubble up. Then the phone rings and it's the children on the line: *You okay?*

In the evening Foppen senior watches the dot of the UK165 on the screen. There goes his son Jochem. He sees the ship approach Den Helder and is reassured. He goes to bed. A few hours later, close to Noorderhaaks, the dot falters.

Noorderhaaks is a sandbar. The waves are sometimes two metres high, and they gnaw greedily at its edges as it retreats at a crawl. Noorderhaaks lies to the west of Den Helder on the mainland, close to the island of Texel. Its nickname is the Razende Bol, or Raging Ball, as if it was a comic strip about a bald, red-faced man who stamps his feet and snaps the tips off cigars.

Like many of the sandbanks in this restless transition area between the North Sea and the Wadden Sea, Noorderhaaks is slowly dragging itself towards the coast and within a few decades it might attach itself to Texel, like a front-seat passenger. Might. There are no certainties on the Bol.

Ships have sunk there, bombs exploded, and in 2012 Johanna washed up, a young humpback whale. Nobody knew who ought to decide the whale's fate. Experts debated the correct approach. For four days, Johanna waved her fins, after which she was given a lethal injection and 'Murderers' was painted on Texel housefronts. The Razende Bol occupies an important place in the ecosystem of the Wadden Sea. The Dutch armed forces hold live-fire exercises on it. Migratory birds stop there to rest. Through binoculars you can see peregrine falcons, sanderlings and curlews, preening their feathers and waiting for a favourable wind. The Bol is also a breeding ground for seals, a quiet place for humans and a daunting challenge for shipping. Wrecks lie scattered across the seabed like the contents of an upturned bag of scrap, from rotting East India Company craft to bronze cannon, submarines, cutters, freighters and passenger ships, along with boxes of explosives. They include a steamship. In the night of 8 May 1942 the *Ruth* was sailing under a Swedish flag, carrying coal in a German convoy from Rotterdam to Gothenburg. Royal Air Force planes saw lights and dropped bombs on the *Ruth*. More than a hundred metres long and weighing over six thousand tons, it went down and ploughed deep into the sandy seabed. Sailors call the wreck Fat Kees.

It's early morning. The wind is getting up. The dot representing the UK165 is motionless for five minutes. Ten minutes. Fifteen minutes. On the radar it grows to form a thick scratch, close to the *Ruth*. The UK165 seems to be wrestling with itself,

moving forwards, backwards, sideways, then forwards and back again. And nobody is watching. Then an emergency beacon makes contact with the water. The automatic transponder in the boat's mast puts out a distress signal. It's 05.46 when the signal reaches the coastguard in Den Helder.

Ping.

I wake up an hour later. My mouth is dry from the beer the night before. On my phone I read the religious texts that have been forwarded to me, then sit at the table to eat bread and cheese. Online I read that everything is ready for the re-enactment festival 'Urk in Wintersferen'. I take a shower, get dressed and cycle to the old village. Life on Urk always gets going early, and always at a brisk pace; whether you're going to a boat or to the supermarket, you hurry. Everybody is rushing on their way to nowhere.

I look around me and see life suddenly reduce speed, a slow-motion replay. The distress signal has reached the village. Everyone looks up, the way people do when a waiter drops a glass during a speech.

A boat.

A boat is missing.

All around me, on bicycles, in lorries, in cars, on the assembly line, at the bus stop, at the top of the steps to the town hall, in the new mayor's office, in the cellar of the village café, in the cut-out artist's studio, in the hall of the museum, at the fishermen's association printshop, on the bench at the harbour, at the newspaper editors' coffee machine, under the clock at the auction, at the gate to the wind turbines, in the changing room at the salmon smokehouse, in the traffic jam at the roundabout, in the engine room at the sluice, at the door to the school, at the supermarket till, at the parks department, in the sacristy, the washhouse and the kitchen, at the harbourmaster's, among aldermen, churchwardens and preachers, the cleaners, the Poles, Filipinos and Bulgarians, the football coaches, the teachers, the church secretaries, and all the fishermen's wives, everywhere time stops, everyone looks at everyone else and the day gains a history.

Ping.

Ping.

Ping.

The coastguard makes repeated calls in vain. The UK165 isn't responding. A fleet of rescuers hurries to the dot on the radar. The coastguard's own *Guardian* and *Visarend*, the lifeboat institution's *Joke Dijkstra*, the navy's minesweeper *Zijner Majesteit Makkum*, a whole fleet of fellow shrimpers from Urk, Wieringen and Texel, two search-and-rescue helicopters and a coastguard plane all hunt for the UK165 and stay in touch with the hastily established emergency team at the town hall. On Urk everybody scours social media for news and salvation.

Like a human chain formed to search a forest for a missing person, the fleet moves in a straight line, scanning its surroundings. The little shrimper that was first to respond to the distress signal gives the others little reason for hope. Its captain spotted a light, looked, then saw nothing more. He approached and saw another light. It was coming from the rescue fleet. Next he spotted a lifebuoy inscribed 'UK165'. Then the *Lummetje*'s ropes. And leaking fuel. All hope was gone. Now the minesweeper's sonar has detected a wreck.

The UK165 is lying on the seabed.

News websites open live blogs. Time passes. Where is the crew? The weather's too bad to dive for survivors. A minute, an hour, two hours: rescuers wait for calmer winds and a weaker current. The media report that there's nothing to report. Urk looks to the skies.

I instinctively cycle to the Fishermen's Monument in the old village. It depicts a woman in traditional dress, her skirt blown up by the wind. She's turning to look back at the sea one last time, at the water where her loved one has perished. Around the statue are dozens of marble slabs with the names, ages and boat numbers of dead seamen. They include the names of Willem and Klaas Foppen, the grandfather and uncle of the now missing Jochem.

I don't feel the need to pray for help from above. For me the loss represents the fateful continuation of history. I sense how this otherwise nondescript day has

suddenly become part of a story about a village shaken to its core every so often, each time asking the same questions, to which the same answers come. I feel my phone vibrate: *Have you heard?* Always anxiety; always fear.

I put my hand to the monument as if it's a lifebuoy, but the Urkers' real lifebuoy stands a few metres further on. That's where they find the answers, in the church, in this case the Kerkje aan de Zee, the oldest and most beautiful building on Urk. There the Urkers shake off their anxiety and fear, like dogs shaking their fur.

The Kerkje, rebuilt in 1786, is at the highest point on Urk, some 8.5 metres above sea level. The church and the monument are connected. They stand side by side. Those who died at sea are prayed for in church: the Bible as medicine.

The monument stands at almost as high a spot as the church. If the dikes ever break, allowing a storm tide to inundate Urk, and water covers the village like a blanket, then the monument and the church will be last to remain. They will rise up and never surrender. As if Urk has been forced to relinquish its fishers but has kept for eternity their memory and their faith in resurrection.

Now, with Jochem and Hendrik Jan so recently missing, a few Urkers are walking around the monument. This is a spot you can always come to, when the sea rises and deathly fear comes down over the village like a bank of fog. One, his face concealed behind a thick scarf, looks at the water and then at the ground. Even those who have never fished, who build or decorate houses for a living, have their minds on the two missing villagers. It's as if everyone is thinking what nobody says. This will not turn out well. Two more names will soon be added.

How many places are there where a single trade shapes village life? A trade where death is always lurking. A trade of which everyone knows the stories and many have experienced the pain. It's a suffering encrypted in facial expressions, in brief sentences: *the sea takes*. When Urkers look at the water, they see their entire lives: sustenance, survival and later riches, but also danger, the power of God. Urkers love the fishing life

and the religious life that goes with it; they embrace the autonomy and freedom for which the village strives. The island mentality fits that life. Crises are always dealt with 'easily' on Urk, because fishing is so much more than work, it's a conviction, a faith, and you don't readily give up on a thing like that. The villagers know no other life.

Every time the outside world expresses doubts about the continued existence of the village and the fishery, Urk straightens its back and crosses its fingers. It happened after the draining of the polders. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Urk surprised everyone by laying the foundations for its current prosperity. In the village there's still talk of the 'Miracle of Urk'. But there's a side to that miracle that casts a long shadow. Paired with the faith, the fishery is a leg this life stands on. When it trembles, the whole village is rocked.

'No, there won't be a happy ending.' I visit Reijer, who lives close to the monument and is willing to say the unsayable. 'That's for sure.' Reijer, the man with the grey beard, stands on a chair and looks out through the window. The sea that became a lake still behaves like a sea. The waves are fringed with white.

'What's the meaning of this?' Reijer asks. He goes over to a small table between the chairs in the living room and points to a book lying between the crumbs and the coffee cups. *Een zee te hoog. Scheepsrampen bij de Nederlandse zeevisserij* is its title: 'A sea too high. Shipping disasters of the Dutch sea fisheries'. Reijer looks at me. Bach plays in the background, novels lie on the chest of drawers, there's no cast on his foot any longer, just a tight bandage.

Reijer is the man to whom I was delivered by his daughter like a parcel. He was one of the first of the Urkers to open doors to me, including the door to his thoughts. Reijer is a barometer, and now the needle is pointing downwards. He looks at the book. The cover shows a woman wearing a bonnet, gazing upwards in prayer. Another woman is holding one hand in front of her eyes. A third has a hand over her mouth. They are grieving.

'Just bought it,' says Reijer. 'So much for saying I'm not particularly religious. A wreck, that's what it'll have been. Stuck fast and then capsized.' He opens the book.

Dicky, his partner, dunks a teabag in a cup of hot water. She looks at Reijer, who slams the book shut and pushes it roughly aside.

Sample translation by Liz Waters