

ABANDONED PLACES

—the Photographer's Selection

HENK VAN RENSBERGEN





INTRODUCTION

For days we had been sneaking around the villa in the dunes. Was anyone still living there? Some of the windows had been broken and the front door was wide open, but when we peered inside we could see that there was still furniture there, crockery in the cupboards and the remains of food on the table. Taking that step through the front door seemed like the most difficult act to perform, but our excitement only increased as we ventured further in. We walked past the coats on the coat stand and into the living room, where there was a box of ‘superlevure’. I still remember it after all these years, because at the time, I asked my mother if she would buy the same kind. It was some sort of yeast you were supposed to put in your soup: it didn’t taste that good, but it reminded me of that villa!

The stairs creaked as we went up them. We could hear stumbling, there was pushing and suddenly, there were other people on the stairs. In the half darkness there was total panic, with everyone trying to run to the front door at the same time, and there, in the daylight, we recognised the boys we had been playing with the previous day on the beach. The summer holidays felt as though they would never end. We got to know every nook and cranny of the ghost villa. There was an ancient black and white TV, which exploded with a loud bang and sent up a cloud of dust into the room. We played hide and seek in the upstairs bedrooms and came upon an old clock that still worked.

A year later, the villa had disappeared and the following year, new apartments had risen up in its place.

I bought my first camera when I was sixteen. I experimented endlessly with things like lighting, night photography and double exposures, and increasingly, I would take my camera with me when I had discovered a new abandoned building.

In those early years, I was chiefly fascinated by all things industrial. Once I'd got my driving licence, I could travel further afield to seek out these places: towards Charleroi, Anderlues, Ghent or Zeebrugge, and of course, to the Buda Marly factory by the canal in Brussels. I have been there numerous times. I have seen it evolve from a coke factory into a concrete skeleton, from a burning monster into a wasteland. The demolition of the factory was halted a number of times. It felt like a battle between the factory and the rest of the world.

One evening, I was sitting on one of the roofs, enjoying the sunset, when I heard the most unbelievable sound, a primal scream. At first it was a deep, gentle rumbling, but then it became shrill and incredibly loud. This is how a dinosaur would have cried out. I watched as a half-detached metal chimney scraped slowly up against its neighbour. This unreal sound, originating from these huge organ pipes, reverberated towards me. It was to be a parting cry, because a few weeks later, the pipes were sawn open with a welding torch and the pitch inside them caught fire. The fire was impossible to put out, and raged for a week. The smoke could be seen as far away as Germany. Buda Marly had become a friend, and this was its way of sticking up its middle finger at the rest of the world.

In the meantime, I had started my pilot training. As well as exercises in acrobatics and 'touch and goes', we also carried out navigation flights, where we would work out a route using a ruler and a protractor, and then carry it out without getting lost. Navigating between the water tower and the church, I discovered the derelict castle of Mesen and marked it on my map, but strangely enough, several years passed before I went inside for the first time.

Having lain empty for 30 years, the building was in a state of total disrepair: there were trees growing through the roof, and ivy and moss were everywhere. The rain came in, the wooden floors were rotten, the walls were damp, and the plaster-work spongy. At the slightest gust of wind, everything would start to creak, and roof tiles would regularly fall off, or sometimes an entire storey.

Yet in spite of all this, the building remained largely intact. Frail and vulnerable like a wrecked three-masted ship, it looked the approaching storm in the eye with its head held high.

Going inside was not without risk, as it was impossible to tell what the next collapse would bring about. The stone stairway, the ground floor and the cellars appeared to be safe, but the wooden floors were so rotten in places that you could poke your finger through them.

The siren call of this magical ruin lured me inside. This was to be the first of many visits.

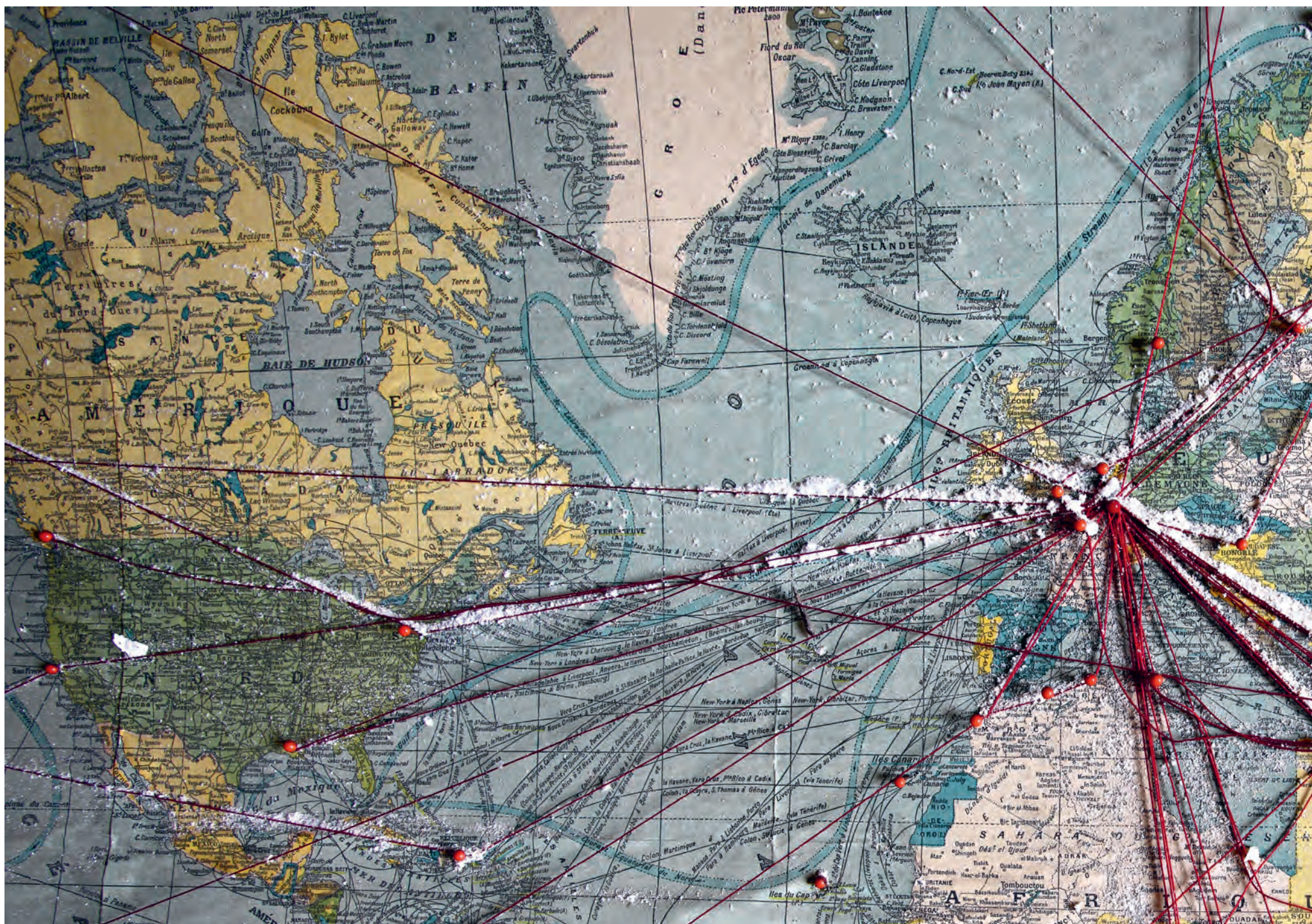
In the nineties, I built a website. At the time, this was still something fairly unique. It was called

'Industrial Art'. Afterwards, it made me laugh, because it was a rather silly name. For the first time, I made contact with a number of other photographers who shared my enthusiasm: a German, a Canadian and two Americans. They are still at it all these years later.

For the first few months, my website attracted just a few visitors a day (a large proportion of whom were undoubtedly me). I was picked up by the press and the number of 'hits' grew. In the meantime, I had my own domain name: abandoned-places.com. There was an article in a computer magazine, a mention in a newspaper, and a radio interview. And then suddenly there were four thousand visitors in one day. I was Yahoo's 'pick of the week'. The number of visitors stabilised at 400 per day and has remained constant. Press interest kept on growing. When Buda Marly was finally demolished (and was on fire for a whole week,) I was interviewed by VRT, Belgian state television.

In early 2000, I 'discovered' Tertre: Buda Marly's big brother: an enormous site full of office buildings, laboratories, dressing rooms, showers, warehouses, machine halls and gasometers, all connected to one another with miles and miles of metal pipes like spaghetti, with the gigantic coke factory in the middle of the network. I was utterly alone in this concrete jungle, watching out for security guards, but also for iron and copper thieves, vandals, criminals and other riff-raff. I walked from building to building, pushed open doors and snuck through corridors and rooms.







ABANDONED PLACES IN

- Alabama—USA
- Austria—WESTERN EUROPE
- Belgium—WESTERN EUROPE
- Brazil—SOUTH AMERICA
- Bulgaria—SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE
- Cuba—CARIBBEAN
- Curaçao—CARIBBEAN
- Dominican Republic—CARIBBEAN
- Florida—USA
- France—WESTERN EUROPE
- Gabon—CENTRAL AFRICA
- Germany—WESTERN EUROPE
- Hungary—CENTRAL EUROPE
- Iceland—NORTHERN EUROPE
- India—SOUTH ASIA
- Italy—SOUTHERN EUROPE
- Japan—EAST ASIA
- Kenya—EAST AFRICA
- Lebanon—MIDDLE EAST
- Louisiana—USA
- Luxemburg—WESTERN EUROPE
- Mexico—NORTH AMERICA
- Michigan—USA
- New Jersey—USA
- New York—USA
- Ontario—CANADA
- Poland—CENTRAL EUROPE
- Portugal—SOUTHERN EUROPE
- Sicily—SOUTHERN EUROPE
- Somalia—EAST AFRICA
- Sri Lanka—SOUTH ASIA
- The Netherlands—WESTERN EUROPE
- United Kingdom—WESTERN EUROPE
- Vietnam—SOUTHEAST ASIA



EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY

NEW JERSEY, USA, 2010

House of 'Slick Willie' Sutton and 'Scarface' Al Capone. This prison was designed to inspire criminals to feel true penitence.

If this didn't work, there was always Cellblock Fifteen, Death Row, after a visit to the hairdresser.

TRAIN DRIVERS' RESTING AREA

BELGIUM, 2006

At the edge of a large marshalling yard, several of the buildings are empty. The way in is down a steep bank, and there's a huge amount of rubbish and junk scattered in between the bushes and the brambles.

Inside, it smells of motor oil and damp paper. In the hangar, locomotives stand waiting for better times that will never come.

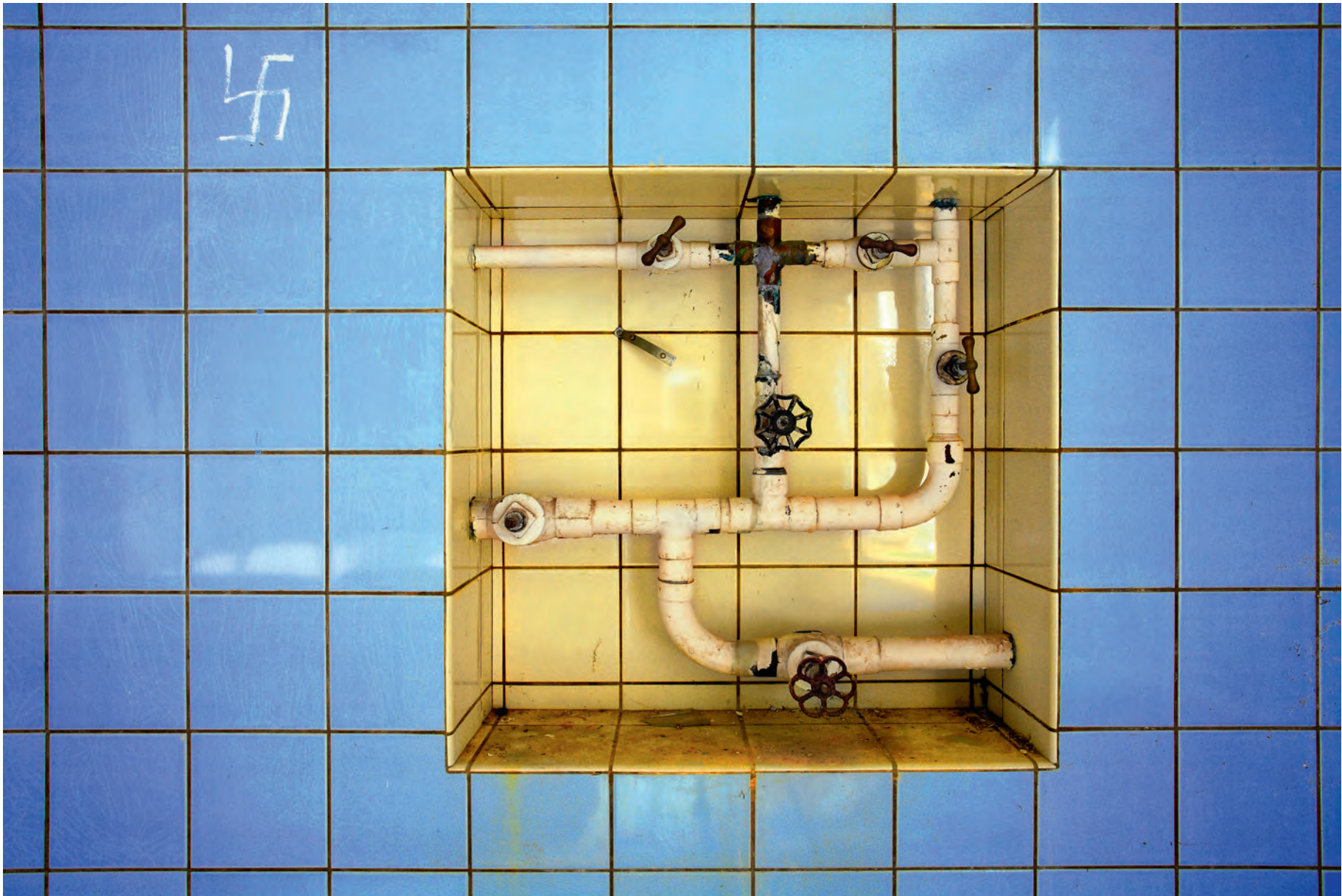
Outside, ivy and buddleia have brought the powerful diesel engines to a standstill.

On the other side of the marshalling yard, a train drives past now and then, and there are railwaymen at work. But there's activity on this side too. The first thing I see is a shadow out of the corner of my eye. I can feel that I'm not alone here. Is it thieves? Vandals? Whoever it is doesn't have a clear conscience, because they're creeping around to avoid being seen. I throw an iron bar in a long arc over to the other side of the hangar. They run away and don't come back.

In the train drivers' resting area, the colours cry out for attention.









ADAM'S THEATER

NEW JERSEY, USA, 2009

I have arranged to meet John at 9 am in the car park beside Adam's Theater. I am rather early and walk around the block a few times, in search of an easy way in. There isn't one: in this area with its homeless people and vagrants, everything is carefully sealed off. It is busy on the street, and I worry whether we will be able to get inside the building unseen. The only option is to go over the barbed wire in the car park and then up a fire escape, in the hope that there is an emergency exit open at the top. I have a chat with the car park security guard. He is from Algeria, and we speak French, which creates a bond. He shows us

the easiest place to climb over the barbed wire, and no, it's not his problem that we want to go in there, and yes, the fire escape is rusty and on the point of collapse.

It is impossible to do this discreetly, and we make a terrible racket as we climb over the wire, which is rusty and sharp. The rubbish belt behind the fence mirrors the dark side of this city, with its broken bottles of cheap liquor, its cans and needles...

The iron of the fire escape crumbles beneath our feet. I go in front as I weigh the least. The doors on

the first and second floors are closed. On the third floor, two steps break off and clatter to the ground. I cling onto the railing and ask myself what the f... I am doing. The last door at the top is jammed. When I put pressure on it, it opens a little way, but at the same time I can feel the fire escape giving way beneath my feet. It is not locked. I prise it open and sense that I am going to win the battle.

I slowly push open the door. Cool, damp air wafts out to meet me. As my eyes get used to the darkness, I can make out the contours of the gigantic theatre...









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TEXTS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Henk van Rensbergen

BOOK DESIGN

Pieter Willems — Pjotr.be

PROOFREADING

Martin Lambert

TRANSLATION

Vicky Morrison

If you have any questions or remarks, please contact our editorial team: redactiekunstenstijl@lannoo.com.

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