

When Gail Lim arrived in the Netherlands, Sipke Vermeulen was seventy-four years old, and Canada was the country of the pilot who fell from the sky over Ysbrechtum in 1940. That night, almost sixty years ago, the parachute had come down like a balloon returning from the heavens. Sipke had heard the explosion, turned his face towards the glint of fire, and run out into the grass with his three brothers. They were older, and they ran ahead of him, their eyes focused on the sky. Above the farmhouse, the parachute floated out from beneath the clouds, it looked like a part of the moon torn away. He watched the figure cradled in the harness, the slender lines of the body growing ever clearer. When the parachute collapsed into the ground, the folds fluttered in the breeze. Sipke's brothers pushed their way through the buttresses of silk.

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They hid the Canadian pilot in their barn. When the Germans came, his father described the explosion and the ball of light, and then the parachute that had appeared in the flames. The Germans asked where the parachute had landed, and his father made a drawing. He told them that the remains had been carried off by the wind, west towards the sea.

Sipke was twelve years old. Three times each day, he brought food and drink to the injured pilot, and then sat with him. The pilot taught him his first English word, which was *thirsty*. Sipke's mother took the parachute, cut it into pieces, and made new dresses for each of his sisters. In time, with the covert assistance of the village doctor, the pilot's broken bones mended. One day, the pilot disappeared, having been taken in the night by Resistance workers who had come up from the south.

When the war ended, Sipke was seventeen years old. Each of his three brothers had married, moving out of his parents' farmhouse and into homes of their own, but Sipke had a longing to see the world. He studied languages, English, French and German at the university in Groningen, and after he had finished his schooling, he went to London. There, in the evenings, he wandered the museums, which were free and warm. In one, there was an exhibition of Robert Capa's photographs. He saw the famous Spanish Civil War soldier, arms flung out in the moment of death; across the room, in the grainy photos of the D-Day landing at Normandy, Allied soldiers, munitions on their backs, laboured through the water. Night after night, he returned to this gallery, he sat on a bench and stared at the images

for hours at a time. Walking home under the street lamps, through the crowds of people, he came to believe that only in stillness, only if he were able to step outside of time, could he begin to make sense of the world.

For half a year, he worked as a window washer, saving enough money to buy a Leica. He travelled across England, then Europe, honing his skills, improving his English. In Berlin, he photographed gaunt, skeletal men, German POWs, walking home to their villages from labour camps in the Soviet Union. The pictures sold to a Dutch magazine, and he told the photo editor that he was willing to travel, ready to go anywhere. Shortly after, he was offered a job as a war photographer. A split-second decision, one that he did not hesitate over, and his life changed. Sipke sent a letter home, telling his mother that he was leaving for Indochina. She called the boarding house where he was staying, and tried, across the crackling lines, to persuade him to come home. How could he explain it? He needed to see things for himself, to know what he was capable of.

Later on, others told him that he had a gift; he was able to catch and distinguish the defining moment. When he was working, he had the sensation of walking into a deep tunnel, the edges of his body dissolving into the scene around him. Yet he was capable – he does not know how or why – of pulling something tangible from the deep. His photographs were picked up by *Elsevier*, *Life* and *Réalités*. He tried to follow Robert Capa's famous dictum: "If your pictures aren't good enough, you aren't close enough." It was the golden age of photojournalism, and the magazines and newspapers

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were hungry for images. In Indochina and afterwards, in Algeria, South Africa and Indonesia, he ceased to feel hunger or fear. He felt that his life was precariously balanced, and all he did to prevent his fall was click the shutter, this sound more real to him than his own heartbeat. For twelve years, he travelled from assignment to assignment, living without a fixed address. In Algeria, he photographed the mutilated bodies of men and women who had been tortured and killed, by guerillas, by the FLN or *colon vigilante* units. He photographed two small children, crawling through the bombed wreckage of their home; and then, that same day, in a neighbouring village, an entire family who had been murdered, in retaliation, by a mob. He felt as if a part of his mind was decaying, he was ashamed of the pictures that he took, and he was confused by their beauty. A dead child abandoned in a field, his face unmarked, the light on his skin. Tiny flowers rising between his fingers.

Nothing made sense, and he tried to separate himself from his emotions, focusing on the sights of his camera to dull the turmoil, the sickness. *The only possible negotiation is war*, François Mitterrand's famous line, rang in his ears, and he knew he was witnessing the destruction of the middle ground. By the time he left Algeria, the estimated casualties stood between three hundred thousand and a million. Everywhere he went, he held his camera to his eyes and saw only the dead.

His first memory of beauty was when the Canadian pilot had fallen into the fields, wrapped in his silk parachute, and

since that day, he had tried to recapture what he felt, staring up at the sky. *I am watching you*, he had thought, running across the grass. *You must be alive, because I am watching you.*

Exhausted, he accepted an assignment from *Elsevier* to travel to Indonesia and shoot a photo essay: Borobudur, dancers in Bali, Khrushchev's visit to the capital. It was 1963. One morning, walking through a slum in Jakarta, he gave a few cents to a fortune teller who offered to read his future. She warned him that his gift would disappear. "Not this year or the next," she said. "But somehow you will lose your talents. You will receive something of great value in return."

Sipke tells all this to Gail as he drives her from Amsterdam towards the north, to his home in Ysbrechtum, in Friesland. Gail Lim is a young woman, perhaps in her late thirties. The first thing he noticed about her, at her friend Harry Jaarsma's apartment, was her smile, which seemed to travel across the room and push him lightly in the chest. She had opened the door, her eyes brightening immediately. They went out to his car, and she carried only a small, old-fashioned suitcase and a canvas bag over her shoulder.

Driving, now, he talks about the three thousand kilometres of fortifications that surround the country, protecting it from the sea. They pass the gleaming propellers of the new windmills, the neat rows of poplars lined up like sentries to buffer the wind. When they cross the Afsluitdijk, and the North Sea opens to the west, she says that the landscape is

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hypnotic. Their car runs down the highway as if they are moving across the beautiful flatness of the ocean itself. "This is a country so small," he tells her, "that on a map it must write its name upon the sea." She is a good listener, she allows him to talk, to ramble, until he runs out of words. An hour and a half, and the highway has already carried them far north, to fields and shining canals. "When I was a boy," Sipke says, "I would ride my bicycle on the farm roads. I would open my arms and use my coat as a sail to catch the wind."

He asks about her schedule, and Gail tells him that she is not due to fly home to Vancouver until Thursday. She has arranged for a rental car and will drive herself back to Amsterdam. He counts the days in his head. "Three days to see this part of the country," he says.

He reaches into his shirt pocket and takes out a small black-and-white photograph showing Ani and Wideh, standing at the train station in Heerenveen, on the day that Wideh left home to begin university.

"My wife and son," Sipke says. For the last thirty years he has thought of Wideh as his own child, and the word comes out before he realizes his mistake.

Gail does not seem to notice. She takes the photo from him, and her expression as she studies it is intent.

She is waiting for him to continue, Sipke knows, but he keeps driving, unable to speak. The realization takes root in his mind: she has not come because of Wideh. It was Ani she asked about over the phone, Ani whose story she wishes to hear. The photograph remains in her hands.

On the side of the highway, they pass an abandoned

farmhouse with the words, painted in blue across the wooden slats, "Too much ocean."

His wife was fifty-seven years old when she died of ovarian cancer. At first, the disease had seemed under control, and then, when illness came, it was so sudden. She had told him that she wished to be buried under a tree, and so he scattered her ashes around the willow in their backyard. Wideh had come home and stayed for half a year. Then the boy, now a man, had left again. He had Sipke's restlessness in him, and the world was calling.

Before she died, the radiation had weakened Ani, causing her hands to tremble; she could not hold a pen or write a sentence. In her patched white housecoat, she would sit beside him at the kitchen table. She dictated her letters to him, and Sipke wrote them out in his own neat script. He and Ani had moved easily between Dutch, English and Indonesian; they had many languages within their reach. When they were younger, the exchange of words, of ideas, was important. But later, less so. He believes that the human body has some other means of communicating, some way that is yet to be categorized by science, or by language itself. Two people can swim in the same memories, the same dreams; that is how it had become for him and Ani.

He had written down her words on paper: letters to Wideh, to the Dertiks and Frank Postma, to friends in Sandakan and Jakarta.

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When Ani died, his world had come to an end. In the days that followed, he sat in his living room, staring out at the canal, the great willows, and felt as if he, too, were passing into a kind of darkness. Outside, the days and nights went on, school children went by on their bicycles, but he chose to stand still. He did not want time to pull him away from the centre of his life. Wideh called every night, and sometimes, across the long-distance lines, they simply sat together, without needing to speak. He was comforted by his son's presence. He would fall asleep with the phone cupped to his ear.

One day, he took up Ani's correspondence again. It was like reaching for air. There were one or two people who did not know, would have no way of knowing, that she had died. From Sandakan, her friends Mas and Halim still sent the occasional letter. In his grief, he had not written them. She was not dead to him. He could not live with such a reality. Instead of writing of Ani's illness, he had simply continued Ani's letters as if she were still pacing behind him, dictating the words. To Sipke, the letters, her continued existence, seemed one of the few things in his life that was right.

Two nights ago, when the telephone rang and the young woman, Gail Lim, had said her name, he had felt as if decades of his life had collapsed, returned him to that time long ago in Jakarta. Now that Matthew's daughter is here, he has made a promise to himself, he will try to tell her all that he knows is true.



Standing in Jaarsma's apartment, her luggage beside her, Gail experiences an unexpected wave of feeling when Sipke Vermeulen takes her hand and says his name. She senses that she is not a stranger to him, but someone known.

Now, in the car, she glances at Sipke, who talks continuously, filling the air with a stream of words. His hair is almost completely white, grand and windswept, and he keeps his scarf on against the chill. The expression on his face is open and kind. He tells her that, next year, he will celebrate his seventy-fifth birthday.

An hour and a half later, Sipke turns down a country road and they pull alongside a house with a high, red roof, surrounded by farmland. To their right, a tidy lawn opens onto a garden. In the cold, the branches of the trees appear crystallized.

"This is our house," Sipke says.

He looks as if he wants to say something more, but then he takes her suitcase from the car and together they go up the front walk, where he stands briefly, searching for his keys. When he finds them, he unlocks the door, pushing it open.

They pass through a foyer and then into a sitting room where the walls are covered with photographs. This house does not feel like a place of absence, as Gail realizes she had come to expect. There are pictures of canals, a field of devastatingly green maize, a windmill that appears to be floating on the water. Among the landscapes are pictures of a woman and a child. Ani Vermeulen, she knows, and their

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son, Wideh. “These are *your* photographs,” Gail says quietly, more to herself than to Sipke.

“Yes. They go back many years.”

She returns to the front door, slips her shoes off, and re-enters. Slowly, she walks along the wall. For a long time, her gaze lingers on the boy, Wideh, captured from childhood to adulthood. She is absorbed by his face, the serious eyes. In one photo, he gazes at a heron facing him, the two standing opposite one another in the grass. Her eyes fall on a portrait of Ani Vermeulen; she is in a café somewhere, not in Holland, perhaps in Asia, light filtering in through horizontal blinds. She appears to be in her twenties, and she is turning her face away as she laughs. Light and shadow play across the picture, across her face, and the portrait is so tender that Gail feels as if she is trespassing into a territory that is both private and revered.

Sipke comes to stand beside her. He indicates a photo, and Gail recognizes a much older Ani, sitting on the grass with her son. “Before, when Ani was here, we kept the walls bare, because she always liked to have a sense of openness, of space. But afterwards, after she died,” he stops, his hands clasped together. “I wanted the house to mirror what was in my thoughts.” He looks past her, towards the photos, then meets her gaze again. “It was seven years ago that she passed away. In 1992.”

When Gail looks into his eyes, she feels as if no time has passed for him. A breath of grief moves through her.

Sipke picks up her suitcase, and she follows him into a

bedroom at the back of the house with a view of the farmland. They admire the landscape together. The sun, bright and full, is just beginning to slip below the horizon. "I will leave you to rest," he says. "We will have dinner at seven?"

She nods, takes his hand, and thanks him.

On the bookshelf in her room is a clear jar, filled with shining marbles. There are kites suspended from the ceiling, and as she walks they brush delicately against the top of her head. The hideaway of a young boy. Wideh's room.

She lies down on the bed, on top of the covers, fatigued by the long drive north. From her bag, she removes the copy of Sullivan's diary, stares at the lines for a time. Somewhere in the house, a television or radio comes on, and she can hear the smooth tones of a woman's voice. Gail closes her eyes, and in her memory the light of a television screen flickers in a dark room. Her father sleeps in an armchair, she has found him there, and the room is quiet but for the sound of his breathing. Outside the window, the branches of the tall trees are outlined in morning light. She can see the clouds moving steadily across the sky, and she cannot shake the sensation that they are adrift on a boat at sea.

She turns onto her back, rests the pages against her chest.

When she opens her eyes, she sees a photograph on the bedside table. In it, Ani Vermeulen is much older, and her hair is tinged with grey. Her eyes, dark and shimmering, are focused on something, someone, that Gail cannot see. Her

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expression is that of a person catching sight of herself in a mirror, half surprised, half relieved to see the face in front of her.



Over a dinner of potatoes and kale, Sipke watches her eyes as they move from photograph to photograph. He tells her that he had arrived in Jakarta in 1963, on assignment for a Dutch magazine.

Gail is sitting across the table from him. Her dark hair is pulled back, gathered at the nape of her neck, and her face, trusting, is pale in the candlelight. She asks, "Why photography?"

He sets down his fork and takes a sip of wine, thinking. "I started taking pictures when I was very young. I felt, then, that a photograph could change the way events transpired. The photograph is revealing, it triggers something that you know, a truth that you haven't yet found a way to express. I saw what was happening around me, and I wanted to change it." He stops and says, only now remembering, "That was a question that Ani asked me, too. You see, after I arrived in Jakarta, I gave up war photography. I went into portraiture, for a time. That's how I first met her."

"Was Ani a photographer, too, then?"

He shakes his head. "She worked in the studio because it was a living."

Outside, the wind picks up, and a sound, like low whistling, moves between the trees. Gail looks towards the

