

# Albanians

**Chris Keulemans**

translated from the Dutch by Jérôme Martin

*Man A, elegant, well-dressed, sits opposite the audience. His hands rest on the arms of a plain chair. He looks into the theater and speaks calmly and winningly to the audience.*

The Kingdom of the Netherlands.

I like to say that to myself. The Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Walking in the streets and out loud, not too loud but still audibly

I tell myself:

I am an inhabitant of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

A resident. A citizen.

A citizen of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

You couldn't do that in just any street, of course.

I don't say it in the Kinkerstraat.

I like best to walk somewhere alone, while the evening falls.

Low sunlight, broad sidewalks, old houses right and left.

Merchants' houses. Patricians' houses.

You almost hear the dampened clip-clop of the horse-hooves.

The coach could come riding around the corner now.

Streets like the Maliebaan in Utrecht.

The Van Breestraat, behind the Concert Hall.

Deventer has streets like that.

And The Hague, of course.

It doesn't happen often, but when I have to be in the area,  
if I have a little time left over, I like to walk into one of those streets.

Not too fast, not too slow—normally. A deliberate, decided step.

A man who can permit himself to take his time.

A man who has nothing to prove.

A respected inhabitant of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Of course, I know there's something sentimental in that. Something archaic.

I'm aware of it while I'm walking there, while I'm talking to myself like that.

Those horses' hooves have long stopped sounding.

And yet I'm serious.

Something really springs out from those words.

They give me the feeling that I belong. That there is an order here in which I am at home,  
because I know what the rules are. A society: the Netherlands.

I know at those moments exactly where I am.

I can read the instant—it hides no secret from me.

I know what it has to offer me as well as what it asks.

How long it takes the sun to sink down behind the houses and the sky slowly to darken.

How the offices of the brokers and lawyers are arranged, now established in these mansions.

What will be served on tables in the other houses, where people still live.

What wine they'll drink with it.

What hangs on the wall, and what music they put on when later in the evening they retreat to the  
parlor to read.

How much they spend on presents at Christmas and St. Nicholas. How much for auntie in the retirement home, how much for the nephews and nieces, how much for one another.

I know how you answer the phone here. What things you do and don't reveal in your first conversation with someone.

How you go about the somewhat greater questions.

How you keep the balance between your mistrust of Haguish politics and your fixed, dead-sure belief in the system of parliamentary democracy.

Between the money you earn and your feeling when you see sorrow on the television.

Between your memory of the preceding years—always somewhat more adventurous and ambitious—and the life you lead now.

It's a way of living that has been developed slowly and deliberately.

It has endured the ages.

A civilized way of living. Balanced. Well-considered.

The people here are untouched by change,

because they know that they have something to fall back on.

They are free to make their own choices, as everyone is here,

but at the same time they are a part of something.

Of a society that has proven its worth.

A whole fabric of laws and rules. Of manners and codes of conduct.

There are endless numbers of them, and yet each of them is perfectly known to the people who live here.

Sometimes it moves me. It makes so much sense.

When I walk across the Maliebaan I feel it.

They have a purpose, those rules. They cover our shoulders like a mantle.

They protect us. From each other. From ourselves.

From everything that could happen.

It's a way of living to which I am deeply devoted.

I am honest enough to admit that.

*Man B sits somewhat further away, also well-dressed, working behind a desk. Now he looks up. He motions to his two assistants that they should do something about this. They go to Man A and silence him with hard blows.*

*Man A stays glued to his chair. It doesn't take him long to restore himself. He continues his story, in the same tone.*

I could not live without beauty. It is a physical need.

I need beauty. No less than water, bread or love.

My body begs for it.

That's why I listen to Mahler. Or to Marvin Gaye.

And when I bought Lauryn Hill last year I almost didn't sleep for a couple of nights.

Just played that cd, over and over, for hours.

I hadn't experienced that in years. That such music is still made.

Everywhere I heard her—in the restaurant, in the park, in the airplane—it was as though that voice lifted me up. She cradled me. So young and strong and proud.

I couldn't stop listening to that voice.

I like young voices. In literature too. The first books of Flaubert,

Dostoevsky, Hermans. Now again with Arnon Grunberg. A young writer is still so relentless.

He must and will tell his story. That is a matter of life or death to him.

And then to follow such an artist.

The work he chisels into creation from his own persona. To see how he ages.

Faces that are an oeuvre. Look at Fellini or Picasso.

Sensual men. Norman Mailer!

Death comes to meet them, but they do not step aside.

They do not yield. They go on lusting after life.

After beauty. After love.

I am convinced that it's no coincidence.

That a connection exists between the land in which we live and the beauty that it produces.

Between the flat land, the wide skylines and the stable democracy.

The victory over water, along with the belief that we must give one another space, makes us a nation of architects and city-builders.

In the beautiful streets we have laid out, in the light of the dwindling evening, the music of great composers and young voices ring out.

On the walls of the indestructible houses where we live hang the works of artists who dare take up the struggle with transience.

It is no coincidence. They go together.

Architecture, democracy, cloud-fields, beauty.

That is the Netherlands. Together they form the Netherlands.

That is why I've lately felt—burdened.

Worried.

An unhappy premonition.

*Man B once again gives his assistants the sign to interfere. They beat A again. When they have returned to their places, B looks at them. A taut, tired face. He begins to speak to them.*

You see. The man is hopeless. Incurable.

I'm sorry to keep you working like this,

but I no longer see another solution. He will not listen.

He doesn't understand it and he doesn't want to understand.

What is he afraid of? He has nothing to fear.

He will never be empty-handed himself. He knows all of the codes.

He won't have to sit through long afternoons in waiting-rooms.

He is surrounded with comfort and likes it like that.

The future is for him a fairly precise notion.

There, too, he doesn't have to worry.

He has a sense of humor and good manners.

There's very little to bring up against his arguments.

They're too rational for that. Too cultured.

I must confess that I've lost my patience.

You don't notice it right away in someone like this, but once you recognize the signs every word will turn your stomach. No doubt you hear it too. There's something about his use of language.

Extraordinarily disturbing. Seductive. Sentimental.

The arrogance of ease. Indifferent to those people who don't resemble him.

That tone. I have a hard time finding an answer to it.

I should be able to reply somehow, but sometimes it just wears me down.

It's above all the tone that unsettles me. Complacent, and at the same time so defensive.

As if he were about to lose ground.

To give up something indispensable.

I think he'd like to stop time. Time stopped and the world shut out of doors.

But we simply have our work to do. Logical and unavoidable work.

I'm sure you agree.

I wonder sometimes why everyone doesn't just cooperate.

After all, it's a responsibility we can't avoid.

And we can't afford to wait too long.

So if he doesn't want to listen, this is just the way it'll have to be. More's the pity.

I'll call you again if it's necessary.

*B bends over his work again. A takes the floor, still speaking to the audience.*

You have probably seen them already. Walking in the streets or on the television. Albanians.

You can tell them apart right away.

I find that fascinating.

That poverty can mark not only individuals, but an entire people.

As if the weight of that peasant existence had lodged in their genes.

It is not easy to see in the women, with those kerchiefs, but it is very plain in the men.

Those bristly heads. Stiff bushes of hair.

You saw that a lot under socialism in Eastern Europe. Among the Albanians that hasn't changed.

It gives them an old-fashioned air. Something from long ago.

They are not very big people. Fairly compact build. Irregular, stubbly heads.

Not white, but a kind of yellow-grey. Furrowed from looking into the sun, frowning by nature.

Heavy eyebrows, often, low forehead.

You can see immediately that they are used to lugging heavy things, spanning oxen to the plow, sitting for hours along the road—those sorts of things.

There is something very functional about those bodies. Kinds of implements, really.

Maybe I should put it this way.

Leszek Kolakowski was a Polish philosopher that moved to France sometime in the fifties.

He was able to judge the difference. He said: the Western culture is best, because it is the only one capable of comparing itself with others. We are the only ones not stuck in our own way of thinking.

We can take a position outside ourselves and examine ourselves. Other cultures lack that.

We know our taste is not the be all and end all

They consider theirs as holy and unassailable.

We know irony. They don't.

They lack that freedom. They cannot laugh at themselves.

Those outside cultures appear monolithic. Perhaps that is the important thing about them.

People don't think for themselves there. They haven't learned to do so.

They aren't raised with our conviction that everyone is an individual, each with his own worth.

That everyone may choose for himself what to do, so long as he takes into account the other individuals around him.

I think that's important. And I think it's beautiful, too.

I think it's beautiful that you can develop your own tastes here.

That you can choose which newspaper you want to read, that you can determine which party you want to vote for.

That you can decide what music you like or which book you want to read next.

That might sound sentimental, but it is essential to me.

And now some people say we are going to have to give some of that up.

Because the Albanians are coming.

They're coming here. To the Netherlands. Because of the war at home and because they can earn more money here. Good. That's fine. Maybe it goes with the times. As far as I'm concerned, as long as their story checks out they're welcome.

But do we have to reward them too? They get a roof over their heads and welfare until they find a good job. Isn't that enough?

Do we have to adapt ourselves to them, too?

Do we have to allow them the things we don't grant ourselves?

Do we have to lower our standards for what's good, just and beautiful because they can't live up to them?

Some people say that.

I don't know. I think a lot about it.

I was walking on the Maliebaan lately. It was already altered.

Nothing had changed.

The houses lay still and distinguished in the last daylight.

The trees thrust high into the dark-blue sky.

It was the same broad street. Deserted, as I like best to see it.

And yet it was already altered.

*A is silent. B looks up and begins to speak thoughtfully to his assistants. Or rather, to think aloud.*

I can't keep my eyes off of them.

They aren't beautiful, but I can't keep my eyes off of them.

Because I can't imagine how it must be, to have gone through all of that.

I would want to know that. Scoop the experience from their faces.

How you walk into a store, get on a bicycle, read a newspaper  
when you've lived through all of that.

Albanians survive everything.

Their schools were burned down, their university forbidden, their politicians degraded, their  
newspapers had to go underground, armed gangs, lynching parties—they survive everything.

More than that: they emerge from it stronger still.

Whatever happens, they watch out for each other. They organize themselves so that no one falls  
behind.

And what they can't get, they build themselves.

They had established a whole shadow-society, before the war broke out.

Schools, hospitals, media—everything.

Here, too, they must learn to use that talent.

Not to become dependent on what we offer them, but to discover what they can do here on their own. And maybe this is the right moment, too.

Maybe they're coming right on time.

Life in the cities is changing. People walk through the streets armed with cell-phones.

You can reach them anywhere. Where their body is no longer matters.

They move like fish through the city.

Street names mean less now than before.

People come and go. They swim from one database to another.

Maybe you have to be a kind of Albanian to make it in cities like these.

Proud of the old, red roofs and the dusty streets of the village where you were born,

proud of your family, your history, your friends,

but always ready to move, ready to cross over the border.

Packing light. A few crystal-clear memories, a minimum of respect for authorities, no illusions, no trust in people you don't know, a mobile phone, ready to go.

Prepared to listen to the language of money.

Prepared to work hard one day and to disappear without a trace the next.

Albanians can do that. Move in here. Build up what they need. Keep an eye on each other.

They know how these things work. They can do things we have no understanding of.

Things we don't have the eyes or ears for. The senses. The criteria.

Things you have to become Albanian for.

*A takes the floor. He is still turned towards the audience and now speaks decidedly.*

Look, I don't know everything about Albanians. I haven't lived there.

But I have been there a couple of times. During the war, too.

Short visits, but very enlightening.

You mustn't forget this: they are survivors above all.

Whatever happens to them, they come through it.

And to survive, they engage in trade.

They've done it for centuries and they still do it.

Not with an eye on the future. They don't build up businesses like we do. For them it's a matter of making it through another day. They sell everything they come across.

Vegetables from the earth, horse meat, chocolate, stolen cars, weapons, cigarettes, drugs.

Lots of drugs. Hard drugs. Everything that has to get to Europe from Turkey and Afghanistan goes through the Albanians.

They don't use it themselves. And that only makes their position stronger.

It didn't take long either before they began to trade in the refugee camps.

After all, they were in need of everything there: food, medicine, clothing, cigarettes.

They bartered at first, but soon lots of money went in and out.

And they always work in clans. With a hard nucleus of two or three deeply intermarried families.

All of those camps came under the control of a clan.

Peacekeepers had no say in the matter.

They disappeared into their hotels after sunset, and then the men took over.

Violently. After all, they had nothing to lose. It was literally life or death.

And it's actually always like that for the Albanians. Always has been.

Turks, Austrians, Italians, Serbs—Albanians have always been oppressed by someone.

And so they always have to fight, smuggle and murder to save themselves.

They don't know any better.

It has become their culture. A culture of death, guilt, loss and violence.

They have an orally transmitted system of laws and rituals. Everything revolves around honor.

The honor of the family, or of the village.

And if that honor is slighted there is only one solution. Revenge.

Vendetta.

They resolve everything with it. They did eight hundred years ago and still do today.

All of their books are about revenge, all of their songs, too. They're proud of it.

In the morning corpses often lay out in the camps.

On the ground near the gate. Intruders from another clan.

They had to be picked up there.

And then it was that other party's turn.

They knew that. They live with that.

*During this last story, B angrily sets his assistants onto A to shut him up. They do their work, but again A recovers quickly and continues. Provoked now. He controls himself, but he has lost his winning tone.*

You can't blame them. Oppression makes people suspicious.

Those Albanians don't believe anyone anymore. They obey only each other.

Fine. Understandable.

But does that make it necessary for them to come here –

where we do tend to trust one another?

Do they have to integrate themselves here? Nonsense. They've learned not to do that.

They'll entrench themselves as they've done for centuries.

Live in the projects like in mountain villages.

Marry within the family, and just continue making new children. Building up their strength.

Did you know that for years Albanians have had the highest birthrate in Europe?

Have you ever asked yourself why that is?

And those children won't go to school here either.

They have, after all, an understanding of shadow-societies. Their own schools, own pharmacies, own stores. They're good at that.

We'll only run into them where they can sell us something.

I can see them standing in the markets already. Albanians in the Dappermarkt.

Or taxi drivers, they have a lot of those, too.

They're very well-suited as porters. Bouncers.

They already have the monopoly in Antwerp.

You won't find a Belgian at the door. All Albanians.

There's a lot of money to earn at night. Cars. The police don't pay attention anyway.

And drugs of course.

They'll laugh their heads off when they discover how that's handled here.

Nobody else need bother with it. Just leave the drugs up to the Albanians.

I know. It's not a welcome story.

But if they're coming here anyway, I think the facts should be out in the open.

Precise information.

If we let only our good hearts speak, and not the facts, the myth-making and stereotypes will just continue. A kind of mystery will continue to surround those people.

That won't do anyone any good.

Violence is second nature to Albanians. That's the sad truth.

Our society is falling apart. You hear that everywhere.

People lack something to hang on to and don't really know who they are anymore.

So we have our own problems too. But do we turn to violence right away? No.

Here we think it over.

We work it out with the shrink. We write novels. We grab the bottle.

I mean: here we know to come up with something other than vendetta.

*B continues to muse aloud to his assistants, at once stern and thoughtful.*

Of course, he's not entirely wrong.

Not all Albanians are as I wish Albanians would be.

Some of them still have the old village in their heads.

I understand that. They're often damaged by the time they get here.

Suspicious. Scared. Treacherous.

Not yet the Albanians of the twenty-first century.

It's not always easy to work with them. They aren't always open to things.

They want to be better off from something. See immediate results.

Otherwise they go complain. Blame other people, blame you. They do that well.

You have to get past that. I understand that.

The problem is just that things don't always work out even when they agree to contribute something of their own. Poetry, music, a celebration.

At least, it's not how you'd hoped. Different.

Simpler, often. More primitive—

though I wouldn't want that word to be used outside this room.

Or more pathetic. Almost tacky. Obvious. Way too sentimental, too flowery.

Their development has been stunted there.

As if they can't yet convert everything they've experienced into things of worth.

As if there's something wrong with their sense of proportion.

Of course, it could just be me.

That I just don't see it. That I have to learn to see it.

We have to remain curious. And be patient.

They'll be here for a while. They live here now.

We have to be careful. Not break more than what's already broken.

Acommodate. Listen to them carefully. Make room.

We're not what's most important. We'll be all right.

We'll be all right. Now about them.

*A has now lost his patience. His vexation increases visibly.*

They're laughing at us.

We organize everything for them. We put them at ease.

We organize parties where they can make the music.

Sentimental kitsch-music.

Ballads about mountains and vendetta. Weeping mothers and dead sons.

We applaud it. Don't understand it anyway.

We eat their bits of badly roasted meat. Fat and bloody.

Sweet grease. Bottles of home-brewed liquor. Transparent. Deadly.

They're laughing at us. With those yellow faces.

They watch our awkward attempts and only feel scorn for us.

After all, they'll just go away again. That's all they talk about.

Back home. Back home. With tears in their eyes.

Victim's behavior.

No sense of responsibility.

Whatever is set out for them here, they come after it quick enough.

But the duties and rules that come with the citizenship, that doesn't interest them.

They don't care about that. It's not part of their nature.

They don't talk about what they can contribute themselves.

They're passers-by, and that's how they act.

As long as they dream of returning they don't feel obligated to do anything.

And if they even had something beautiful. But they don't have that.  
They have no style. They can't dance. And those women—  
they have sharp heads, almost snouts. Bony shrews.  
Greedy, yes—they grab at you everywhere, they want it all.  
Especially your money. With those gleaming eyes.

*B continues speaking with concentration to his assistants.*

This is a beautiful age. We're living in a beautiful age.  
Irreconcilable. A world that doesn't fit in your head any more.  
People that live side by side in different time periods. Irreconcilable people.  
Nomads. Systems analysts. Fascists. Thrillseekers. Adrenaline junkies.  
Stockbrokers. Psychiatrists. Shepherds. Side by side in irreconcilable cities.  
It's about time.  
That other life was worn out.  
Living at one pace, in one time, at one address, that was no longer possible.  
Comprehending everyone around you, understanding everything around you, that was then.  
Beauty—that is the irreconcilable.  
Albanians in the Netherlands, that is beauty.  
And we need to take care of that. That there'll be room for that.  
We bear that responsibility.  
Nobody else will make the future for us now.  
*(points at A)*  
Only people like him. They're in the way.  
People that stare themselves blind at the differences.  
Who don't see that's just what it's all about.  
That we won't make it otherwise.

That otherwise we'll stand still. Dry out. Die off.

People like him are a threat. A threat to our lives.

They're in the way.

We have to do something about people like him.

*A rattles on.*

They aren't clean. They pollute the air. Where they land they stoke high fires and the smoke rises up black through our cloud-fields.

They keep their clothes on day and night. Three layers, four layers, vests, dirty shirts.

Sooty shirts.

Always ready to flee farther. Always on the lookout..

They can't stay. They don't know what that is. To stay.

To preserve things as they are.

What they come across they eat up. What they can no longer use they let lie.

They build up nothing.

They don't know what it is, to walk two times into the same street and find everything standing there just like before. The houses are intact, the trees aren't burned down.

The experience of walking into the same street three times, ten times,

when you're twenty and again when you're sixty, and that the street remains unscarred.

They don't know that.

They stink. They're afraid. They're poison. They don't belong here and they know it.

*B stands up abruptly. His assistants immediately jump to their feet, move towards A, but B waves them off with one hand. He turns around and walks himself towards A's chair. A turns his head, waits a moment and speaks for the first time directly to B.*

But you are the lowest. You can't get any lower.

People without feeling. Without memory.

Blind and deaf. Cold people. Cold inside. Deeply frozen. Dead.

Blind into the future. Fearing it.

Fearing for your place, your place on Earth, later, when the Albanians come to take it over.

Forgetting where you come from. Who you grew up with. The language you learned to speak in.

How did it happen? Where did you forget it?

Where did you leave behind what you should carry with you?

You don't know me anymore. You don't want to know me anymore.

I'm antique. I'm an obstacle.

I still speak the language you no longer want to hear.

Not-Albanian. I speak Not-Albanian. Never-Albanian.

I don't speak violence. I don't want violence.

I live in the old world. The world that worked. That worked like a heart.

The Kingdom of the Netherlands. That world.

I lived just like you. You lived there too.

But you don't know that anymore.

You've forgotten yourselves. You don't want that world anymore.

You want something else. To be someone else.

Albanians.

You want to be Albanians.