FIRST DISPATCH

Off by heart and out of breath

Dear Reader,

This is the first in a set of fourteen dispatches to be written about a walk from the Northern French town of Guînes to the Zeeland port of Vlissingen. These dispatches are being posted to a small group of recipients connected to four countries: South Africa, France, Belgium and the Netherlands. The four countries are all part of the story.

The walk retraces the route that one family of Huguenot forebears followed when they fled France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. There are two parts to the walk. The first is circular and it takes in the three villages in which this family lived - Offekerque, Vieille-Eglise and Guemps - as well as the two towns to which they went to baptize their children – Guînes and Calais. Following on from this is a longer linear walk that leads away from these French villages to the Dutch harbour of Vlissingen. Both the circle and the line will be walked in the summer of 2014. For most of the way I will be walking alone.

Off by Heart and Out of Breath is conceived as a project of recuperation. Three hundred and twenty eight years separate the fleeing of this family from France and my re-visiting of the places they inhabited. Beyond knowing their names, the villages in which they lived and the towns in which their children were baptized, the ship aboard which they left Vlissingen for the Cape of Good Hope and the farm and utensils they were granted on their arrival there, I know very little about this family. There is no story, no existing diary, no letters, no family narrative retold down the generations.

Walking these villages will be a means of connecting myself to the places they knew. There will not be much that outwardly refers to this history and I will need to pay attention to the less obvious. I will actively consider that which is missing – the sound of psalms sung, for instance, an act already forbidden to Huguenots before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Or the absence of Reformed schools and Temples that were forced to close. I doubt that there will be any traces of Protestant graveyards since they were, eventually, forbidden from burying their dead at all.

As I walk I will pay attention to the weeds growing on the verges and consider them as guides to culinary, medicinal and domestic habits of the seventeenth century. Plants now disregarded as being of little use were once considered valuable enough to carry away as seeds to a new country. South Africa is the adopted home to any number of plants once prized in Europe as herbal remedies and brought with settlers to the Cape. Weeds speak of migrancy and disruption and as such are rich in metaphorical potential.

And then there are tasks that I can perform while walking that will insert the voice of one Huguenot descendant into these places aban-

doned. I will teach myself to recite the line of descent from Suzanne de Vos and Pierre Jacob, and then the lines of descent from my other Huguenot ancestors. I will repeat the names of the children who were born (and died) in these villages. I will memorize the common names and uses of the weeds that I find growing on the verges. As I walk I will record a set of audio wandergrams about my desire to know something of these forebears and their experiences while admitting to the elusiveness, even impossibility, of such a task.

When my feet tire on the long route from these villages to Zeeland I will resort to old remedies and put mugwort leaves in my shoes.

Wendy Morris

DISPATCH 02 FROM VIEILLE-EGLISE

On what I know for sure

Dear Reader,

There isn't much that I know for sure.

There is a passenger list of the ship De Schelde that sailed for the Cape of Good Hope from Vlissingen in February 1688 that includes the names of Pierre Jacobs, Suzanne De Vos and their five children. There is a list of household and agricultural goods loaned to them by the Dutch East India Company on their arrival at the Cape, as well as a description of the land they were given to farm.

Birth, baptism and marriage dates are easy to confirm as French Protestants were compelled to record these events for the state. The children of Jacobs and De Vos were born in Vieille-Eglise, Offekerque and Guemps, three villages within walking distance of each other. They were baptized at the Huguenot temples in Calais and Guînes.

In 1685, two years after the birth of the youngest Jacobs-De Vos child, the Edict of Nantes was revoked. Huguenots lost all civil and religious rights. It became illegal to be an adherent of the Calvinist or Reformed Church. Huguenots were forced to renounce their faith or face the consequences. Temples were closed and priests were given fifteen days to leave France. Citizens were forbidden from fleeing. Despite this ban hundreds of thousands fled.

There is too much that I do not know.

The Huguenots of Guînes fled France on foot together with their priest Pierre Trouillard. They arrived in Cadzand where they were welcomed by the Reformed community. Pierre Jacobs and Suzanne De Vos, also members of the Guînes congregation, are not listed amongst the refugees who arrived with Trouillard. I have not been able to find any indication of when this family fled France. Given that their last child

was born in Vieille-Eglise two years previous, it is possible that it was from this village that they left. Whether they fled alone or with others remains unknown. Which route they might have followed, whether they travelled at night to avoid detection, what they carried with them or left behind, can not be known. Events in the years between the birth of Abraham in 1683 and 1688 when the family set sail from Vlissingen for the Cape are a blank.

Early on a Sunday morning in July I stand in a street in the village of Vieille-Eglise. My rucksack is packed for a ten day journey: change of clothing, set of topographical maps, camera, sound recorder and binaural mics, and a journey book already divided into ten blank sections.

I try think backwards to the mid 17th century and the events that I have been researching and wonder where to start on this journey of recuperation. The one architectural element that dominates the village and must have done for hundreds of years - given that the village is named for it - is the old church, and so I start here. I am looking at a building that would have been known to Suzanne de Vos and Pierre Jacobs.

As I stand on the front porch I think of those who entered this church freely and those who did not. Protestants who did not flee were forced to renounce their Calvinism and re-enter the church to take Mass under the watchful eye of the Catholic authorities. They were compelled to take active part in the rituals – knowing that the ‘magic’ of those rituals was the part they most rejected.

I wander around the village. The cemetery is no longer at the church and the oldest graves are from the mid-19th century. No De Vos’s, no Jacobs there. There would have been a separate Protestant cemetery, probably outside of the village perimeter. The twins Pierre and Daniel who were born and died here would have been buried in it. It starts to rain and I have to put my camera and recorder away.

Vieille-Eglise was described at the time as having a substantial Protestant community. It’s a small place, even now. To what extent would it have been emptied when the Protestants fled? Who might have taken over the empty cottages and deserted lands? I try to think of it as a ghost town with families disappearing quietly into the night.

There are cottages on the outer ring of the old village that look as though they have been there, in some form or other, since earlier times. There is a uniformity in their positioning, all set at the same oblique angle to the road. It is easy to imagine each as a small homestead surrounded by patches of land. In the ditches running alongside the cottages there is mallow growing – common, marsh and giant mallow. I am pleased to see it. It is one of the weeds that I have been studying and I know that it was used widely in the 17th century as a vegetable, medication, tea and even as a rudimentary toothbrush. If it is growing here now – opposite those old cottages - then it might have been growing here in the time of the Huguenots.

As I walk I think of my footsteps as impressing a weight upon the roads of Vieille-Eglise. I think of my body as a returning presence, a physical trace of those ancestors whose blood still runs in my veins. As

I walk I return a gaze and a listening ear to a place which had once been seen and heard by my forebears.

I have to keep moving if I am to reach Guînes by evening and I leave on the road towards Nouvelle-Eglise and Offekerque. It is still raining.

DISPATCH 03 FROM OFFEKERQUE

A silva rerum

Dear Reader,

The land leading to Offekerque is flat. There are ditches and sluices at the side of the road and I remember reading that this had been marshland until the 16th century when local men were hired to drain it by a system of ditches. Now it resembles polder-land and flax is being farmed on an industrial scale. There is a house set far back from the road and as I pass a pack of dogs tumble out of a side door and rush across the field at me. I stop walking and face them not at all sure of their intentions and wondering if the mugwort leaves in my rucksack will hold them off. They turn out to be friendly. So either the ancient remedy does work or the dogs had good intentions all along. I reach Offekerque via a bend in the road. It is still raining and with the rain cap pulled low over my forehead I hardly see the village, with the exception of the inside of a café where I dry off and drink a herb tea that smells good.

The first child of the Jacobs-De Vos family was born in Offekerque and died a month later. Notwithstanding the grief this must have caused the parents, the act of burying a family member had become something of a problem for Protestants. The Edict of Nantes had decreed that they would be provided with their own cemeteries and allowed to bury their dead in peace. In 1666 Louis XIV amended that Edict by declaring that Protestants could only bury their dead at dawn or dusk, and only in those places where the exercise of their religion was permitted. Further, a maximum of ten people were allowed to accompany the body to the place of burial. This caused all kinds of difficulties to families who would have to travel at night with the body to reach distant burial grounds by dawn. If they set out at day break they might have to travel for some hours after the sun had risen and risk being accosted by Catholic parish priests who insisted the interment should have taken place at dawn. It led to instances of bodies being abandoned along the road. Catholic-inclined villagers were known to shout abuse at Protestant funeral corteges, throw stones at them, break open the gates of the cemeteries and fill open graves with bones or manure.

In the café in Offekerque I write into my journey-book. It has already been divided into ten sections, one for each day of the walk, and each

section is further sub-divided. In each section there is a walking-diary page that I write into during my stops, as I am doing in the café. There is a page for a map that I'll work on later. There is a page for each of the weeds that I have associated with uses in the 17th century and which I am collecting along the way. These pages already contain information about each plant and are there to remind me to look for them. There is a page entitled Off by Heart in which the matrilineal line of my descent from the seven Huguenot woman who fled France for the Cape is set out. These I will teach myself as I walk. The rest of the pages carry headings and have margin notes but are otherwise blank. There is a page for remedies and recipes, for considerations of absence, for the listing of sound recordings and wandergrams, for descriptions of smells, and for thinking about the act of walking in connecting myself to places and histories. The margin notes in each page are intended to keep me attentive to these tasks. In each section there is a page on the erosions of the Edict of Nantes and the growing persecution of the Huguenots.

The journey-book is a form of silva rerum. This term, rooted in Roman literature of the first century, describes a work in which different kinds of writing and genres are blended. It translates as 'a forest of things'. Pablius Papinus Statius published his Sylvae around 95AD. They consisted of five volumes of poems that he had written for different occasions. Some were praise poems to the emperor, some were lamentations on the death of his father or the wives of friends and even of his favourite parrot. There were joking pieces, wedding poems and even descriptions of the villas, gardens, and artworks owned by his friends.

Fifteen centuries later the idea of a book 'of everything on anything' was reborn. Sylvae were created within Polish land-owning families in the 16th century and were worked on over many generations. These books contained a variety of subjects that included genealogy, agricultural advice and personal memoirs, philosophical musings and recipes. They contained a blend of forms and genres. Paintings, drawings and music scores mixed with historical, anecdotal, and even fictional texts. As one generation passed on, so the next generation took over the task of compiling the silva rerum. Never intended for publication these 'living books' were for the edification of the family. They served as a bond to its past.

The idea at the heart of my project has been to create a silva rerum for this family of refugees. It would contain the kind of information that they – and especially the women - might have thought important enough to take with them: remedies, recipes, genealogy, anecdotes, favourite psalms, contact addresses, title-deeds of lands abandoned or confiscated. In contrast to the Polish sylvae which were about continuity, this one was to be about discontinuity and dislocation. It would be a sort of migrant's manual.

A 'living book', however, needs to be written by the living and in the present. As I started to prepare the book I realised the limitations of what could be included. Though I might imagine what Suzanne De Vos thought valuable enough to enter into such a book, I was not wanting

nor able to do it on her behalf. Rather more interesting an approach, I thought, would be to focus on the frustration of not knowing, on the absence of information. This not-knowing-but-determined-to-try-to-know could be physically explored by journeying through the villages and roads that Suzanne knew. Absence of knowledge could be mitigated by physical presence and exertion, and the silva rerum could be the record of this interaction.

The present of this silva rerum has become the time of the walk. The receptacle has become the journey-book. The anecdotes are mine. The headings written in in advance, like the historical information gathered in the margins, direct my thoughts and imagination as I walk. Evenings are spent reconciling this historical information with the experience of being in these places. When I reach Vlissingen and the end of this journey this book will have taken on the shape of a silva rerum.

It is still raining when the patrons in the café direct me towards Guemps.

DISPATCH 04 FROM GUEMPS

Guemps c'est nul

Dear Reader,

'Guemps c'est nul' is written inside the concrete bus-shelter where I am eating a sandwich. It is midday on Sunday and I listen to the bells of the church chiming the hour, once, then again, and now a third time. With each set the sound grows softer until it gradually disappears into the sound of the rain falling. The street is quiet. If there are people living here they are all keeping indoors.

In an amendment to the Edict of Nantes Protestants were forbidden from ringing the church bell for their services between Thursday morning and Saturday noon. It was not as though the sound of their bell was any competition to the harmonious chimes of the bells of the Catholic Church. It was a simple bell rung once to give notice of the hour of the service.

Many of the restrictions made on the practices of the Protestants were aimed at silencing them. To make sound or noise is the prerogative of those with power and with every amendment to the Edict the Protestants ability to be heard, to hear themselves, was eroded. From 1661 there was to be no singing of psalms on the way to services and no singing of psalms outside churches or temples. No whistling of psalms either. Singing was tolerated inside the temple only if done quietly and not if a Roman Catholic procession carrying the sacrament was passing by outside. By 1685 all singing of psalms was banned, even in the privacy of their homes, and confiscation of all property was the punishment.

Psalm singing had become a contentious issue long before the Edict of Nantes. It had become a form of Calvinist self-identity, a rallying cry

and a form of defiance. In the period before the Reformation singing in religious services had been the responsibility of clergy and priests. That changed when John Calvin introduced psalm singing into services in the early 1500s. By 1562 he had published the Genevan Psalter in which all 150 psalms had been put into verse and to music. It was an instant best-seller. Reformists were encouraged to sing psalms in church, at home, in the workplace, streets and fields. These were sung not in the slow, soporific way that we learnt in Sunday school but vigorously, in brisk folk tune tempo. These were rousing songs and they provided believers with a sense of unity, courage and consolation in times of persecution. They became battle hymns, with psalm 68 being called the Huguenot Marseillaise.

The skies finally clear and I set off in the direction of Balinghem. I'm a bit behind schedule and it is still a long way to go. I could take a more direct route to Guînes but I want to follow the quieter ways and I have a reason for passing through Balinghem.

Frightening sounds have been used in situations of war since the earliest times. Drums, music and shouting are old tactics to strike fear in the enemy. In World War II whistling devices were added to bombs to make them more terrifying. In Syria, in recent times, the government has dropped exploding sound bombs over rebel areas. Israeli drones sent into the Palestinian areas are equipped with noise for maximum psychological intimidation.

The Huguenots were not only silenced but were subject to noise as a tactic of coercion.

In 1681 the first Dragoons were billeted on Protestant households in Poitou. The intention was to use these mounted infantry soldiers as 'boot missionaries' to force Calvinists to renounce their faith. The households in which they were placed had to pay their wages and upkeep and the soldiers were given free rein to indulge themselves there as they pleased. 38 000 abjurations were recorded in that region that year.

The Dragoons communicated orders on the battlefield with drums and they seemed to have used these same drums as tools of conversion. There are reports of Huguenot households being subjected to incessant drumming to deprive them of sleep and push them to the limits of endurance. There was worse too, every sort of humiliation or torture that could be imagined was inflicted by the dragoons upon their hosts. Men were strung up by their ankles or had their feet forced into boots filled with boiling grease. They were forced to drink vast quantities of water or to sit under a slow drip of water. They were forced to grasp burning coals. Women and girls were subject to sexual assault.

As word reached Huguenots that the dragoons were being billeted in their town they would rush to renounce their belief and convert to Roman Catholicism rather than risk ruin and even death.

It is peaceful walking along the canal towards Ardres. Once in a while I pass a fisherman sitting quietly on the bank. There is nobody else travelling by foot. Now that I think of it, I haven't passed anyone walking since I set off this morning.

I'm not certain if Huguenots went to the temple in Guînes on Saturday or Sunday, but if it was a Sunday then I might have met them travelling back this way to the villages of Guemps, Offekerque or Vieille-Eglise. If it was before 1661 then I might have heard them singing psalms as they walked or rowed. Later they would have had to sing very quietly, if they dared to at all. Wondering if I was a Calvinist they might have hummed a bar of a well-known psalm as they passed by. And if I was a Calvinist I would have hummed a bar back as a mark of recognition.

DISPATCH 05 FROM THE BANKS OF THE CANAL D'ARDRES

Plants-out-of-time

Dear Reader,

Guemps is some hours behind me. The sun is shining and it is rather pleasant walking along the canal d'Ardres. For a short while three geese accompany me. Pink willow herb is in flower and growing thickly along the water's edge. At intervals along the bank fishermen are perched on box-seats intently watching their lines in the water. On the other side of the road are small plots of land with standing caravans. Some are maintained and clearly occupied, others are run down and in various stages of decay. The worst of them have mossy windows and abandoned appliances rotting in the garden.

There is an open patch of stony ground and I smell a sweet fragrance that I recognize. My nose alerts me to its presence before my eyes pick it out. It is Melilot, a tall scraggy bush with little white flowers dotted along the stalks. It isn't very common and I'm really pleased to find it. It smells so good and I take my time picking it. Before I left on this walk I collected armfuls of Melilot near home and spread them out in the studio to dry. Each time I entered the room I was overwhelmed by the fragrance which got stronger as the weeks wore on. The plant contains the substance coumarin which is found in Mullein and Sweet Woodruff too. Coumarin has been described as giving the scent of new-mown hay, though that hardly begins to describe the delicacy of Melilot's fragrance.

The flower stalks go carefully into an envelope and into my backpack. As I walk on I wonder how many times before this walk that I must have passed Melilot and never smelled it. Or rather, never realized that I was smelling it. It is only since I have been studying weeds and have learnt to recognize Melilot that I seem to be alert to its smell and presence. I start to realize that I probably smell many odours that I do not consciously register. In my journey-book I am describing every smell that I notice.

In Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries people washed

infrequently and their houses and bodies were smelly (strange that we prefer to use the word 'smelly' in a negative sense). To combat these odours rushes or straw were strewn thickly on the floors and covered with a layer of aromatic plants or strewing herbs. As the herbs were walked upon their natural oils and aromas were released and the rooms smelled 'sweete'. They were strewn in all areas of the house, from the kitchen to the bedrooms, and even in the stables. Meadowsweet, Tansy, Chamomile, Lemon Balm, Sweet Woodruff and Melilot were amongst the 21 strewing herbs recommended by Thomas Tusser in his 1557 instructional poem, 'Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry'. They worked as insecticides too, repelling fleas, flies and moths.

The scent of Melilot cannot have changed from the seventeenth century and so I add this fragrance to my short list of sensory experiences that I might share with my Huguenot forebears. The list includes the sight of the church of Vieille-Eglise, the smell of the manure heap outside Offekerque, and the sound of the church bells in Guemps.

I'm just starting to notice that I have seen no bridge over the canal. To get to Balinghem I should be crossing over and walking away from the water at right angles. Re-reading my topographical map I realize that this lack of bridge has been obvious from the start and that I should have been walking on the other side of the water. I had chosen this side as the road looked quieter and I wouldn't have to walk facing oncoming cars. And it has been a good choice with only two cars passing me all afternoon. But now I have gone too far in the wrong direction and I won't be able to cross until I reach a footbridge, which it seems, is another two kilometers further. Once over I will then have to backtrack to Balinghem. It has been hours since I sat down and I am starting to feel my feet. Guînes, my stopping point for the night, still seems a long way off.

DISPATCH 06 FROM BALINGHEM

Incantation

Dear Reader,

Suzanne Jacobs was fourteen when she fled France with her parents, and seventeen when she arrived at the Cape in 1688. Within months she was married to a Dutch immigrant, Gerrit Van Vuuren, who had arrived the previous year. Van Vuuren was awarded a tract of land that his wife (it must have been her) named Balinghem. In the title deeds of 1693 the farm is listed as Bellinchamp. Today it is called Bellingham.

As I walk into the tiny town of Balinghem I wonder why Suzanne called her farm after this place. In my research I have found no connection of the family to this town. Suzanne did not choose to call her farm

after the towns in which she and her siblings were born, Vielle-Eglise or Offekerque, though that is no surprise since these names refer to Catholic churches in the towns. She didn't call it Guemps either. Her parents called their new farm De Goede Hoop, which reflects an optimism that their future might be better than their past. Most farms awarded to French refugees were named after the places they had been forced to flee: Normandie, Picardie, Laborie, La Bri, La Motte, La Cotte, Calais, Languedoc, St Omer, La Dauphine, Cabriere, La Provence. The list of farm names reads like a geography of religious dissent.

Balinghem, it seems, had a substantial Huguenot population before the Edict of Nantes was revoked, but as I wander through it the town offers no clues that can reinforce that knowledge. It is a very small place, four streets, a few houses, a tiny 'English' church. There are no shops or café and nowhere to sit but in the graveyard that encircles the church. There is nobody around. It feels as though the eyes of the town are closed and it is refusing me eye-contact.

Did I expect to discover the connection between Suzanne Jacobs and Balinghem by coming here. Not really. So why have I made this detour. It would have been quicker to have gone directly from Guemps to Guînes. I knew when I set out that the project would be less about what I would find in the villages than what I would bring to them. I have called it a project of recuperation but it is as much a project of projection. The tasks that I have set myself while walking have been about impressing my presence, or a sense of my presence, onto these places. The sound of my voice. The weight of my footsteps. The vapour of my exhaled breath.

I teach myself the first of seven matrilineal lines of descent from my Huguenot grandmothers. I don't find it easy to speak out aloud. There is no one about so it's not that I'm afraid of being overheard. It is that my voice sounds foreign to me. I do it anyway. It starts off as awkward recitation, committing the names and their order to memory, mixing them up, stumbling on the Johanna Jacobas and the Catharina Dorotheas. Eventually I can remember them from beginning to end. Now I recite the names as an incantation, a line of descent projected onto this little town that seems to want to reveal nothing of its troubled history.

Leaving Balinghem I turn off the tarred road and onto a sand track leading between the fields. It shows up as a thin line on the topographical map and I am hoping that it will be the short cut to Guînes. The sky is darkening with rain clouds and there is a breeze picking up. I feel a sense of exhilaration as the country-side opens up around me. No church steeples, no buildings of any kind, no traffic. The weariness in my legs and feet disappears and I walk purposefully across the hill. There is deep pleasure in this locomotion.

DISPATCH 07 FROM GUÎNES

A consideration of absence

Dear Reader,

Breakfast is in an old forge now converted into a dining room. As I write in my journey-book a couple comes in to eat. At first they speak to each other in normal tones then, as they became aware of the quietness of the room, their voices drop down to a whisper. I can't imagine why they feel the need to whisper to each other at a breakfast table and I find it hard now to concentrate on my writing. Whispering presupposes someone in the vicinity who must not overhear the conversation or who must not be disturbed. Yet it is disturbing. When people talk in reasonable voices I can white the sound out. When they whisper my attention is drawn to them and I can't white them out.

I find the ruin of the Protestant temple of Guînes.

I have brought with me a small photograph of the site that I found when doing research. Without it I would never have known that the site still existed and I would not have gone looking for it. The woman at the tourist office has not heard of the temple or of Huguenots in Guînes but she recognizes the site in the photograph and directs me to it.

I walk past it before I realize that the meter-high stone wall and empty site behind it are the remains of the temple. The back and side wall have been retained but the front wall has been demolished to a half-meter in height. The street entrance is still visible in the stone work, though it is bricked in. The concrete floor stretching away from it looks as though it has been laid over the rubble of the demolished building. It is being used as a parking space by the car repair garage adjoining the site. I step onto the floor and walk across to the back wall.

The temple of Guînes was described at the time as being a spacious building shaped as a large trapezium with two tiers of galleries. It could house more than three thousand people. Approximately a hundred and forty babies were baptized here each year. Five of those would have been the children of Suzanne De Vos and Pierre Jacobs.

I want to see around the side of the building and walk a little way down the driveway of the property next door. A woman comes out of the house and I show her the two photographs that I have. The second one is of the empty site between two houses where the minister used to live. She recognizes it instantly and sends me around the block in the other direction. There, at the back of the temple and probably leading onto it, is the site of the missing minister's house. It is an empty space between two other buildings. The left wall belongs to the town hall, the right wall to another house. In front of this space is a corrugated iron fence that blocks access and any view from the street. Traces of the demolished house can still be seen as a palimpsest on the side wall of the neighbouring house. There is an exposed fire-place and its chimney and paint traces on plastered walls.

It is strange, this double absence. Strange that both the temple site and the minister's house have not been replaced with new buildings. If the inhabitants of Guînes wanted Huguenot history to be erased from memory then surely they would rebuild these two sites and remove the traces. Perhaps a small memory of this history does linger here after all.

It is a wonderfully sunny morning and I have found myself a table on the terrace of the café Au Duc de Guise. I angle my chair so that I face the space that once was the house of priest Trouillard. Trouillard must have had some standing in the community to have had his residence in a house adjoining the town hall. In 1685 he, like all Reformed priests, was given fifteen days to leave the country. He left, walking with a group of his congregation to Cadzand in Zeeland. By then the temple had probably been demolished. Possibly Trouillard had been forced to supervise that destruction himself.

Church bells are marking midday. A radio plays inside the café. My thoughts are on the idea that a sense of absence depends on being aware that something or someone is missing. Because I know of the forced closing of the Guînes temple and the exodus of the congregation I perceive these two spaces as sites of absence. Sites that were once meaningful to many thousands of people who were persecuted and fled. Sites that have become spectral presences of absent events.

From my seat at the Duc de Guise, with the binaural mics in my ears and facing the space where the house of the Huguenot priest once was, I record an 'absencegram'. Then I pack my books and recording equipment into my rucksack. Robert Louis Stevenson once wrote that he was unsure which gave him the most pleasure, putting his rucksack on in the morning or taking it off in the evening. Rucksack on, I set off for Calais.

DISPATCH 08 FROM CALAIS

Traveller's foot

Dear Reader,

There is a weed that accompanies me on my walk. Through Vieille-Eglise, Offekerque, Guemps, Balinghem and Guînes it has been constantly at my feet. It is officially called Plantain but is better described by its common names of Waybread, Traveller's foot, Roadweed or Cart-track plant. Waybread grows close to the ground with a rosette of tough green leaves and a green-brown flowering spike. It is a nondescript little plant, one that is not only resilient to scuffing or being walked upon but seems actively to prosper from such treatment. The plant is so common along my route that I begin to see it as a travelling companion.

Despite its weedy appearance Waybread has been esteemed as a

medicinal herb. It is mentioned in the tenth century Lacnunga, a collection of Anglo-Saxon remedies and prayers, where it is described as one of the sacred herbs and an ingredient in the Nine Herbs Charm. Venerated as the 'mother of all worts', Waybread is mentioned in every influential English or European herbal that follows. It is recommended variously as a treatment for dysentery, rabies, hemorrhoids, inflammations, bites, stings, scabs, shingles, sores, itchiness, sunburn, repelling of worms, and the staunching of blood. Travellers were encouraged to crush the leaves and bind them to the feet to prevent blisters or relieve aching feet. Beyond its medical properties it was considered a useful pot-herb or vegetable.

With the noon sun on my back I am walking along the canal that stretches from Guînes to Calais. It will be a short walk today, about 13 kilometers. I think of recording a wandergram but the hum of traffic from the far side of the canal is omnipresent and I am dissuaded. The route that I am following on the quieter side of the water begins as an asphalt road and soon narrows to a foot-path. Groups of fishermen have set up their equipment on the grassy banks of the canal. It feels good to leave town and resume the pace of long-distance walking.

Waybread has other common names, one of which is White man's foot. Carried to North America in the seed pouches of settlers as well as in the mud-impacted hooves of their horses, Waybread seemed to follow in the tracks of the immigrants. Native Americans observed that wherever Europeans went this weed would soon spring up. As they learned of its many medicinal properties they began to include it into their own repertoire of remedies.

The canal from Guînes flows into the waterways encircling Calais. I leave the water and head through the town towards the old centre. The hôtel de ville seems disproportionally large. Laid out in front of it is an immense garden with immacutely tended flowerbeds and Auguste Rodin's sculpted group, The Burghers of Calais. The sombre portrayal of these six anxious men preparing to give up their lives in return for the town's freedom sits oddly in the opulence of the garden and its bright flowers.

There are signs of a drama of a different kind being played out in the streets of Calais through which I walk. Here and there young men are asleep on patches of public grass. They aren't dozing, they seem to be deeply asleep. Crossing over the railway bridge I can see down to the tracks and here too men are stretched out and sleeping on the waste ground alongside. As I near the centre of town young men in groups of twos or threes pass by. They are darker than the average Calais burgher, with facial features suggesting they have travelled from East Africa or the Middle East. It seems to have been a long journey for they look worn out. Their hair is ungroomed, their clothes are ill-fitting, second-hand. These are refugees heading for England, biding their time in Calais until they can hitch an illicit night ride in or under a truck heading for the ferry to Dover.

The term refugee entered the English language with the influx of

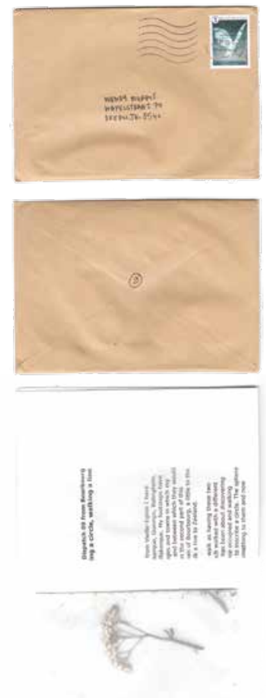
French Huguenots in the seventeenth century. Fifty thousand fled across the Channel while Louis XIV sat on the throne. Emigration of Huguenots was forbidden and the French authorities stepped up patrols of ships and the sea coasts. Capture meant fines and imprisonment at the least, possibly transportation to the new world or, for men, a lifetime's service chained aboard the French King's galleys. Traffickers were as active then as now and Huguenots paid dearly to stow away on fishing or foreign ships. The authorities took to fumigating the holds of ships with noxious gases in an effort to flush stowaways out. Today they use heart-beat detectors and sniffer dogs.

I reach the coast. The wind is blowing strongly off the sea. A P&O ferry sails out of the harbour and I wonder how many refugees managed to get aboard. More likely that the forty men who are supposed to get through each day make it onto the night ferries. My hotel doesn't open until evening and so I sit and watch the police towing away parked cars from the promenade. Tonight there will be a firework show here to celebrate La Fête nationale. I am tense, find it hard to concentrate on how the town might have been in the seventeenth century. I wonder about the value of trying to recuperate this history when there are such desperate present-day refugee dramas being played out around the town. My project starts to seem quaint and indulgent.

As soon as it is opening time I head for the Victoria Hotel and check in, pleased to be able to get off the streets of this unlovely town. Outside an estimated twelve hundred refugees will be sleeping rough.

DISPATCH 09 FROM BOURBOURG

Casting a circle, walking a line



Dear Reader,

The circle is closed. Setting out from Vieille-Eglise I have walked a ring that takes in Offekerque, Guemps, Balinghem, Guînes, Calais and returns to Offekerque. My footsteps have formed a path between the villages and towns in which my ancestors lived and worshipped and between which they would have journeyed. Today I start on the second part of this journey as I set out from the town of Bourbourg, a little to the north-east of Offekerque, to walk a line to Zeeland.

At the outset I conceived of the walk as having these two parts, the circle and the line, each walked with a different intention in mind. The first part has been about discovering the places that my ancestors once occupied and walking between them in such a way as to inscribe a circle. The sphere that it delineates once meant something to them and now means something to me.

Walking the line has a different purpose. There is no record of the

route that the Jacobs-De Vos family took in their escape from France. In 1683 they were living in Vieille-Eglise, and 1688 they are listed as passengers on a Dutch East India Company ship bound for the Cape of Good Hope. All that can be known for certain about their journey from Northern France to Zeeland is the distance they covered. Walking the line is to be about feeling that distance.

With two croissants tucked into my rucksack I leave Bourbourg in the direction of Coppenaxfort. There is no shoulder to the road and as each speeding vehicle approaches I step off the road onto the grassy verge and wait for it to pass. After forty minutes I reach the Ancien Chemin de Bergues and am finally free from traffic. This old farm road winds its way through large fields and I soon have a pleasant sense of being lost among them. It is wonderfully quiet, by which I mean there is no sound of traffic. I connect the binaural microphones to the Roland recorder, put the mics in my ears, and start recording a wandergram. I review the journey from the beginning. I muse about walking as a form of research. I think about the work that I will make about this journey once back in my studio.

In 1685 routes leading to the frontier teemed with fugitives. Forbidden from leaving the country but facing persecution if they remained, Huguenots took every chance they had to escape. Despite all roads out of France being patrolled, and towns, highways and bridges being watched, two hundred thousand managed to get away. Some went openly as bodies of armed men. Others assumed disguises of beggars, travelling merchants, sellers of beads and chaplets, as gypsies, soldiers, shepherds, or even as Catholic pilgrims ostensibly on pilgrimage. Many were forced to bribe officials or pay ‘guides’ to help them over the border. Others seized the moment to escape when patrols were away or off guard. Some took unusual paths hidden from public gaze, travelling at night, or under cover of bad weather.

I reach a crossing with a road leading off to the left and, still in conversation with myself, I hear myself wondering if I should take it, decide against it and continue onwards. Then when I get to a T-junction I realise that I have made the wrong decision and am again walking along a busy road. After a quick reorientation on the map I am able, some way further on, to rejoin that quiet farm road. It is lined with ditches on the sides and I sit on one of the flat wooden bridges and eat my croissants. The water running underneath is crystal clear and teeming with little fish. I listen back to the wandergram and realise that the mics and the recorder must have disconnected as there are only ten minutes recorded. Pity.

Soon I reach the canal de Bourbourg and follow it towards Dunkerque. The route becomes progressively less interesting as it approaches the outskirts of the city. The map indicates a GR footpath which I follow until it leads me to the edge of the canal with no way to cross. So I backtrack and resign myself to walking on dusty service roads. An occasional truck laden with sand passes by. It feels a bit eerie, walking here, on roads that were never designed for pedestrians. A surprising

variety of weeds are growing along the verges of the road though. I see yellow Melilot for the first time. It doesn't smell as sweet as the white variety but that could be due to the heat of midday. I pick a sprig of yarrow and hold on to it, thinking about the folkloric belief that yarrow held in the hand will ward off fear and hexes. Though I am rarely anxious about walking alone the isolation of this area does work on my nerves a little. To the passing truck drivers my backpack marks me out as a traveller and I am clearly walking alone.

Protestants rejected any belief in the magical protective properties invested in objects. Not for them the idea that bells blessed by a priest could repel a storm, that a glance into the chalice after Mass would cure jaundice, or that the consecrated Host could extinguish fires. For them the spoken, read and sung word were the centrepiece of religious experience. I don't much care for either side of those arguments but, clutching my sprig of yarrow, I do have a sense that channelling an anxiety towards an object does work to lessen it. It is as though the anxiety is directed away from me, concentrated into that grip on the plant.

It is very hot. The heat bakes up from the asphalt onto my face. I am walking now on a broad cycle path alongside a two-lane road. The industrial periphery of Dunkerque stretches endlessly in front of me. An Auchan shopping centre appears in the distance like an oasis. Shade, a seat, cold water. I sit in the Flunch diner for an hour, I could sit here all day. Then I walk on for two hours in a straight line. It is a dismal pavement walk past shops, houses and low-rise apartment blocks. I think of the writer Will Self and the walk he makes from his home in London to Heathrow airport. From there he flies to JFK airport and then walks to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Self describes the monotony of plodding 'arrow-straight miles' through metropolitan 'interzones'.

It takes another hour to reach the northerly quarter of the town and find the hotel. The couple in front of me at reception have oh so many queries for the receptionist. My feet are glowing hot, my legs ache with tiredness. This would the moment to fill my shoes with mullein or mugwort or waybread but all I want is to sit down and get the shoes off.

DISPATCH 10
FROM THE FRENCH BORDER

Divine wrath

Dear Reader,

It is seven-thirty as I leave the hotel and head towards the coast and the GR120 footpath that will lead to Belgium. From the promenade I look back towards Dunkerque and can see only the twin FRAC buildings. Behind them smoke billows upwards. There must be something burn-

ing in the harbour. The red-and-white GR markers indicate that the route is along the promenade and I set off, settling into a long-distance walking stride. The peep-peep of reversing sand-working vehicles on the beach provides a dawn chorus.

I'm not certain exactly where the border was in 1685. It would have been north of Dunkerque as this was the most northerly French port at the time. Dunkerque had been acquired by the French in 1662 when they bought it from the English. They immediately fortified it as a large military port that could hold up to thirty warships. The area must have been teeming with military personnel and I imagine that my ancestors would have kept a wide berth of it. In their attempt to cross the border they would more likely have chosen a quieter inland route. The country north of France, now Belgium, was in the hands of the Catholic Spanish and would not have offered refuge to fleeing Huguenots. It was the next border, between the Spanish Netherlands and the Dutch Republic, which they needed to cross before they could feel safe from persecution.

Though it is early it is humid and hot and I am already drenched in sweat. Breakfast would be welcome but the shops are shut. At the end of Malo-les-Bains the promenade ends and the red-and-white footpath markings point to the beach. The tide is out and there is a broad stretch of hard sand. It turns out to be a comfortable walking surface, softer than asphalt but firmer than dry sand. Massive concrete bunkers from World War II lie on the beach. It is hard to tell if they have rolled down from the dunes or if the dunes have been washed out from under them.

Between Leffrinckoucke and Bray-Dunes I record a wandergram. I remind myself of the reasons for this walk. I try to formulate the question that has been uppermost in my thoughts throughout this project. It is this. How can religious belief lead to justifications for killing those defined as 'heretics'? I struggle to understand the deadliness of religious beliefs that disallow the reverence of any but one 'true' deity, and one correct way to revere that deity. How it is that deviations from the 'true' belief can be perceived as so threatening to communities that dissenters must be forced to renounce their 'heretical' beliefs or face death.

Sudan April 2014. Meriam Ibrahim is sentenced to be hanged for apostasy. Born to an (absent) Islamic father and Christian mother, Ibrahim has been raised as Christian. She marries a Christian man. Under Sudan's strict Islamic penal code a woman's faith is determined by that of her father and women are forbidden from switching faiths. Her Muslim relatives report her to the religious authorities and she is charged with apostasy and adultery, for her marriage to a Christian man is not recognized. Muslim men may marry Christian women but women born into the Muslim faith may not marry Christian men. Ibrahim, pregnant with the couple's second child, is sentenced to a hundred lashes for adultery – delayed until after the birth of the child – and hanging for apostasy – delayed until the child is two years old. She is given three days to renounce her Christian beliefs and revert to Islam. Imams visit her in prison and attempt to convert her. Like other Christian prisoners she is told that any debts she has will be written off if she converts. She

refuses, vowing to keep her faith even if it means death.

In Eradicating the Devil's Minions: Anabaptists and Witches in Reformation Europe (2007) Gary Waite suggests that the central attitude behind the persecution of heresy of any sort in the Reformation is the conviction that the public expression of heretical or blasphemous notions about God, or his agents on earth, angers the divinity and will bring down God's wrath on Europe. Removing the heretic is a means of removing the threat of divine wrath on the community.

Three quarters of Huguenots did not or could not flee France. With the help of the Dragoons and threats of fines, confiscations and lifetime service in the King's galleys, Calvinists were forced to renounce their beliefs and revert to Catholicism. France was declared free of heretics. The new converts were not trusted and were watched carefully. They were compelled to attend mass and take communion. They were to answer to a roll-call and were corralled together in special areas in the church. To add to their subjugation the most prominent among them were made to carry the candles, holy water and incense in the service. They were compelled to send their children to the priest to be baptised and to bring them up Catholic. Their sons had to be educated at Jesuit schools and their daughters sent to the nunneries, and the costs were to be borne by the parents.

Feet take on a new importance when walking long-distance. I'm careful how I place them. Mustn't trip. Mustn't sprain an ankle. The right socks and boots become a subject of interest. This morning as I laced up my boots the laces suddenly looked so thin and breakable. What if one was to snap? I'd be stranded. I never thought to bring spares.

After three hours of walking facing into the sun I head through the soft sand up to the promenade of Bray Dunes. It is a relief to get my pack off and sit down. My clothes are drenched in sweat. Coffee, sandwich and then chamomile tea on a shady terrace. I write in my journey book. I hear snatches of Dutch intermingling with the French spoken at the tables around me. It is the melodic Dutch of Flanders and it makes me feel as though I am near home. I hadn't expected the border to approach as a sound, as a language.

At midday I return to walking at the water's edge. I am looking out for the border. I want to have a sense of crossing from France into Belgium. But there is no border. The beach continues onwards, uninterrupted. In the dunes I see a French flag on a pole, a small parking area and a restaurant, 'Maison à la dune' that is advertizing pizza. Is this the border? There is an earthen road coming down to the beach and then more dunes. Two women are walking towards me and I ask them if this is it. They are Belgian and yes, this is the border.

An unfortified border. That would have been helpful to my fleeing forebears. It is a bit of a disappointment to me though. I wanted to have a sense of walking out of one country and into another. There have been numerous signs along the way that attest to the defense of borders: those German bunkers from World War II that had rolled onto the beach, those refugees in Calais waiting to catch an illicit ride under

a truck in order to cross the sea border between France and the United Kingdom. But here I will not need to wait for dark, nor pay a guide or bribe an official. I won't have to dress as a Catholic pilgrim or a seller of rosaries to move from one country to another. It's a lovely sunny day and I just keep on walking. France disappears behind me.

DISPATCH 11 FROM OOSTDUINKERKE

Sarie Marais

Dear Reader,

Walking on the beach means there are no decisions to be made about direction and no wrong turns possible. The Netherlands is ahead, Belgium runs parallel, and France is behind me. Shells make a pleasant crunching sound underfoot. It is hot but a faint breeze along the water's edge makes it preferable to walk here than on the promenade. Anyway, the promenade is uninteresting, a continuous line of tearooms, ice-cream palaces and shops selling beach equipment.

As I walk I try to imagine the ship De Schelde sailing past here in the winter of 1688. It was a Dutch East Indian Company ship, a 'jacht' built in 1682 in the shipyards of Middelburg. This was its sixth voyage, heading for Batavia via the Cape of Good Hope. By some accounts it left from Vlissingen, by others from Wielingen near Cadzand. In addition to the crew and other passengers there were twenty four Huguenots aboard. These included six family groups and four single men. All had fled persecution in France or the Spanish Netherlands (Belgium). All had some experience of farming. In that year approximately two hundred Huguenots were transported by the Dutch East India Company to the Cape.

The refugees were allocated loan farms that were strategically scattered amongst Dutch properties so as to prevent the forming of a separate French community. The children of the Huguenots were to be bilingual. Official correspondence was to be in Dutch. Religious services were tolerated in French and to this purpose a Huguenot priest, Rev. Simonds, was sent out. After fifteen years Simonds returned to Europe to oversee publication of his writings and was replaced by a Dutch priest. From this time on all services were to be in Dutch. In the absence of a French priest a layman, Paul Roux, a Huguenot refugee from Orange, was elected Deacon. He was the first and last French reader, teacher and visitor of the sick. Until 1713 Roux kept a baptismal register of all children born to French parents. Thereafter baptisms of French descendants were not recorded separately from those of the Dutch. Integration seems not to have been a problem. Families such as my forebears were likely to have been bilingual before they left Europe, having lived in an area that was once part of Flanders. Marriages

between French refugees and Dutch settlers occurred from the start. Susanna Jacobs' marriage to Gerrit Van Vuuren within months of her arriving is but one example. By the time her grandchildren were born French as a home language had disappeared.

French surnames remained. There are still many South African families bearing the names of Fouché, Du Toit, Roux, de Villiers, Naudé, du Plessis, and others. Some of the French names mutated into Dutch phonetic spellings. Mesnard became Minnaar. Pinard became Pienaar. Jourdan became Jordaan. Villion became Viljoen.

I reach Oostduinkerke by early evening and find the Peerdevisser hostel. On entering the room I will be sharing I find two Flemish women already settling in. We introduce ourselves and they try to place my accent. South African. Seemingly without hesitation the one starts to hum the tune from 'Sarie Marais'. The other recognizes it, sticks her head out of the shower, and joins in. I am serenaded with a song made popular in the Anglo-Boer War. They tell me that they learnt the song in school. I learnt it in school too, though then I wasn't very pleased with it. It seemed to represent so much that I disliked about my white Christian Nationalist education and enforced reverence for Afrikaner history and heroes. In the years that I have been living in Belgium I have had quite a number of (older) people sing it at me once they have detected my South African origins. At first I was less than interested, viewing their being taught this song in school as confirmation that Flanders had been in support of the Afrikaner Nationalist government. More recently I have been able to think of it in other ways, as an historical trace, a long-submerged musical memory that is triggered by my South African presence.

The pleasure my serenaders take in singing Sarie Marais has nothing to do with the historical context of the song, for I'm certain they have little or no knowledge of this context. For them the pleasure seems to be in the Afrikaans idiom, the similarity but not quite sameness of it to their own Dutch.

That this musical memory is triggered in two women sharing my hostel room on an evening during this walk of recuperation of Huguenot history, can only be described as surreal. For the song is connected to this history. The Marais of the title is a misnomer. The Sarie to which the song refers was a Maré. She was Susara Margaretha Maré, born to Voortrekker parents in 1869, and she was a direct descendent of Suzanne De Vos and Pierre Jacobs, as well as of a number of other Huguenots.

Aged about sixteen Sarie married journalist and poet Jacobus Petrus Toerien. Toerien, it is suggested, heard the song Sweet Ellie Rhee sung by American mine workers, and he translated it into Afrikaans and dedicated it to the young Sarie. Over time other verses were added and the song came to speak of contemporary battles against the English. Sarie Marais reached the height of its popularity in the Second Anglo-Boer War/ South African War of 1898-1902. In both the First and Second World Wars it was sung by South African troops in Europe.

In the hostel room in Oostduinkerke I get both women to sing Sarie

Marais while I record them on the Roland. They remember only the first verse and chorus but we find the other verses through my phone and do a second take. They struggle a little with the unfamiliar Afrikaans phrasing in the later verses. It is an uneven performance but one that I will treasure for the serendipity of the occasion.

DISPATCH 12 FROM OOSTENDE

Narratives

Dear Reader,

It is 7h40 and I am downstairs waiting for the breakfast room to open. Checking the news on my phone I read about a Malaysian airplane that has been shot down over Ukraine. Two hundred people have been blown apart and Russian-backed rebels are believed to be responsible.

Leaving the hostel after breakfast I pass a garden filled with tall mullein plants that are in flower. I've been looking for this plant for ages, not only on this walk. Mullein likes full sun and sandy soil and tends to grow away from other plants. I pick two large leaves to put in my shoes should I need them, and a number of smaller ones for my collection. The leaves are covered in fine hairs and feel downy to the touch. Feltwort, Velvet Dock, Blanket Herb and Duffle are some of the English names for Mullein and it is easy to see why.

The plant had a variety of uses. Torches, Candlewick Plant, Hag's Taper, and Koningskaars are common names that point to its earlier usefulness as a source of light. The plant was dipped in tallow and used for lighting funeral processions. Its leaves were rolled and used as wicks in lamps. Mullein was smoked as a remedy for lung complaints and so gained the name Cuddy's Lungs. It was believed to combat earache, migraine, toothache, gout and warts. Its seeds have a sedative or narcotic effect and were thrown into the water to intoxicate and immobilize fish so that they could be hand caught.

One of the smaller leaves goes into my travelling pouch. Thomas Cockayne writes in his 1864 book Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of early England that 'if a man beareth one twig of this wort, he will not be terrified by any awe, nor will a wild beast hurt him, or any evil coming near'. I hope it works for women too. The travelling pouch is filling up. It contains Yarrow against fear and hexes, Mugwort against evil spirits and wild animals, Comfrey root against theft, White Milk Nettle against melancholy, Stinging Nettle for courage and against lightning strikes and an Elder knot to ward off attackers. Well covered for most eventualities I walk on.

At Nieuwpoort I leave the beach and take the passenger ferry across the Ijzer river mouth. There are large beach works on the far side of the

river so the ferry has a new drop-off point at the yacht harbour. It is quite a way to walk back to the coast but I follow footpath markers and eventually reach Lombardsijde. It is really hot.

Tomorrow will be a rest day and I will give a presentation in Oostende. This will take the form of a salon evening at the home of Els Wuyts and artist Yves Velter. Els and Yves periodically open their house at the corner of Rome and Amsterdam streets - a poetic crossroad - for brief exhibitions, talks or salon evenings. It will be my first opportunity to give the project a narrative form, to start to compose it into story. The idea of narration is important to me for it is this aspect that I find lacking in the history of these ancestors. The journey-book, which forms the first book of the silva rerum, is a means of combining historical facts with the experience of walking through the villages we once occupied, but it is a journal of short writings, notes and comments. It won't read easily. The dispatches, which will form the second book of the silva rerum, are to be composed out of the journey-book entries and melded into a set of narratives. These become the literary component, a communicable story of a search for these Huguenot ancestors.

From Lombardsijde I continue to walk on the beach. I pass Westende, then Middelkerke and then Mariakerke. By now the skin on the back of my legs is starting to burn and I need a break from the sun. I take a tram through Oostende and out to Bredene-Duinen. From the tram-stop I walk another five kilometers land-inwards through the polders until I reach the farm where I will be staying for two nights. It is a relief to put the pack down. Today I have been feeling the distance of this line that I am walking from France to the Netherlands.

DISPATCH 13 FROM SINT ANNA TER MUIDEN

Letters

Dear Reader,

My hostel room at De Wullok in Blankenberge was once the sick bay and is reached through the men's toilets. It is tiled in white and smells strongly of disinfectant. The mattress and pillow are protected with thick plastic covers. During the night I wake up with a sense of claustrophobia and the conviction that I have breathed up all the oxygen in the room. I open the window but there are no burglar-bars on it and if anyone chose to they could easily climb in from the road outside, so I close it again.

I am on a train and the female conductor walks down the aisle carrying a large white envelope which she hands to me. The letter inside has been translated from French and is the explanation of my walking project. I am puzzled. I already know why I am here. The letter is

intended for them, for the railway company.

The smell of mugwort is pungent and I push the bag away from my pillow.

Today I am walking out of Belgium and into the Netherlands. I leave the streets of Blankenberge and take the footpath through the 'fonteintjes', a nature reserve in the dunes. Then I follow the tram route towards the harbour of Zeebrugge. There are tug-boats in the harbour, and further out at sea is a large container ship at anchor. The sea and the vessels that travel upon it have always seemed foreign to me. Apart from an occasional ferry trip I have never used the sea as a form of travel. Yet it was not so long ago that it was the only means of transport between South Africa and Europe. When my parents went to work in London in the 1950s they travelled by ship. It took three weeks. In South Africa we still talk of going 'overseas', and it wasn't until recently that we lost the option of sending mail by ship. Ship-mail would take about a month to reach a European destination. I imagine the Huguenot migrants would have thought that was fast. Their journey from Zeeland to the Cape took four months. At that time any post sent back to Europe would have taken up to six months to reach its destination and that long again to bring a reply. I wonder if Suzanne De Vos did write to family left behind in France. She would certainly have been literate, for the ability to read biblical texts was highly valued by Protestants, both men and women.

I wonder what might have been contained in those letters, had she written. News of the death of her two youngest sons within a year of arriving at the Cape. The marriage of her seventeen year old daughter the same year. The hard labour of trying to turn uncultivated ground into a working farm. The desperate need in 1695 for a second loan from the Company. Her husband's death in 1698. Her second marriage a year later to Nicolas De Lanoy, fellow passenger on the Schelde and owner of the farm next door. Would her daughters have sent news of her death in 1708, twenty years after they fled France, or would all contact with family in Europe by then have ceased.

I am drinking tea and reading the Guardian headlines on my phone in a café in Heist. The first article is about the passenger plane that has been shot down in the Ukraine and the chaotic state of the crash site. There is a description of the train into which the recovered bodies are being stored. The doors are being kept shut because of the stench of decaying corpses. Only teams properly equipped for the overpowering smell will be able to sort or examine the bodies. How terrible that description must be to the families.

I do not see the woman who sits down at a table behind me but a cloud of perfume, deodorant or cleansing products suddenly engulfs me. It is not possible to distinguish the scents one from the other. It is a fog fume of fabricated smells, synthetic and overpowering, designed to camouflage the odours of a live body - breath, sweat or menstruation. I, in contrast, smell like a walking, sweating body. During my rests I try to keep a polite distance from others.

That these dispatches are letters is intentional. Their letter form is part of their content.

Letters are resistant, by which I mean they can endure. In the archive of my father is a leather suitcase packed tight with letters still in their envelopes. The woman to whom they belong has been dead for over thirty years. Her correspondents have been dead even longer, many of the letters date from the First World War. The addresses on the envelopes include South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. In a wooden box next to these is a set of letters from the late 1920s, from my grand-mother to the man she would marry. My grandfather handed them to my father towards the end of his life. In a card-board box are letters sent to family from China from a great aunt who was teaching there. They are dated just prior to the Second World War. The author of the letters managed to get away in time but her sister, who was also teaching there, was trapped and held as a prisoner-of-war. There is, I think, a correspondence between my father as a young boy and his father, then serving as an officer in North Africa, though these letters I have never seen. There are many letters from my grandfather, an avid letter writer, who was constantly researching family history and would type his letters in threefold, using blue carbon paper between the sheets. There is a set of letters addressed to my mother from my maternal grandmother as she travelled the globe on a series of luxury cruises. There are letters from us to our parents, sent from places as far afield as Vladivostok and Vancouver.

Histories are inscribed in the pages of these letters. They include few big ideas, rather they are filled with the details of travels, of modest achievements, of hopes and disappointments, of domestic life, of health and welfare. They are chronicles of lives lived away from those for whom we care deeply. Embedded in them all is a discourse on absence.

At a festival in Leipzig I met Parine Jaddo, an Iraqi filmmaker living at the time in Beirut. For years she has lived as a refugee in different cities, being forced to move on whenever that city was drawn into conflict and no longer safe to work in. She keeps her suitcase packed and can never accrue belongings that exceed in weight the plane travel allowance of 23kg. Despite the chronic limitation of space in her suitcase letters from her mother, written over decades of separation, travel everywhere with her.

From Heist I take the road to Westkappelle and from there towards St Anna ter Muiden. Some of the way I follow a cycle route so as to get off the very busy road to Sluis. The first sign of a border is a house in Dutch style. Then I notice more and more Dutch number-plates on parked cars. I think I must have crossed the border on one of these small farm roads but I have seen no official markings. I enter the tiny town of St Anna ter Muiden and the sign at the entrance confirms that I am in the Netherlands.

The church that carries this name, Sint Anna ter Muiden, is quite extraordinary. From a long way off I have seen its tower, though I did not realize that it was part of a church. Now, close-up, I can see why.

The tower stands alone, the 14th century cruciform church that once surrounded it is gone. Replacing it is a modest Protestant church that has been built up against one side of the tower. The incongruities of design and proportion are striking and I spend some time studying them. Traces of the nave and transepts of the cruciform church are still visible as scars on the walls of the tower and there are odd recesses that reveal fragments of fine brick arches that must once have been inside the church. The older building, I learn later, was built at a time when Mude, as it was then called, was an important harbour and trade city at the mouth of the Zwin. The tower even doubled up as a lighthouse. By the end of the 14th century the river mouth had silted and the town could no longer function as a harbour.

In 1648, with the peace of Munster, the line between the Protestant Dutch Republic and the Catholic Spanish Netherlands was drawn and Sint Anna ter Muiden was right on that border, just inside of the Dutch Republic. The Protestant church attached to the tower was completed in 1653.

The adaption of this ruin has a certain resonance for me on this walk. I started the journey in the town of Vieille-Eglise at the door of another church, probably from the same era but still in one piece and, judging by the well-tended flowerbeds around it, still inspiring confidence in its doctrine. That church would have been familiar to Suzanne De Vos and Pierre Jacobs, and would have represented all that they rejected. Now I am standing on the grounds of another church, a ruin of a Catholic church that has been readapted to serve as a buttress for a Protestant church. This building must have been as visible to the refugees trudging through the polders as it was on my approach. If they knew what it was and what it represented, they must have been deeply impatient to reach it. It would have meant a safe haven, an escape from both Catholic France and the Spanish Netherlands. It would have been the first Calvinist or Reformed church that they would reach and a place where they could finally rest. Reports of Huguenot refugees reaching safety described them as being close to exhaustion, frequently ill or nearing starvation.

I would like to go inside the church but it is locked, as churches in the Netherlands seem always to be. This is strange because churches in Belgium, which have so many precious objects on display, are usually open. I pick up my backpack and walk on. It should only be a short distance to Sluis where I am staying tonight. Tomorrow will be the last day of my walk.

DISPATCH 14 FROM A LIGHTHOUSE

Point of departure

Dear Reader,

It is the last day of the journey. I have walked one hundred and ninety five kilometers according to the pedometer. By the time I reach Vlissingen it will be over two hundred. I feel as though I could keep going. I really would like to keep going.

Not waiting for breakfast I leave Sluis and soon find my way onto the North Sea Cycle route. The verges of the track are thick with wild plants. In parts the path is raised and I can see across the fields. There is a strong breeze blowing which makes walking a little more effort than usual but it is fresh and cool and wonderful to be out here. I make a rhyme and then have it going around and around in my head.

Mullein, mugwort
Meadowsweet and mallow,
Ragwort, fat-hen
Burdock and yarrow.

The path leads me past the large grassy mound that was once Fort Berchem, past Retranchement, and towards Cadzand. It is to this town that I have been heading, for it is here that I am assuming the Jacobs-De Vos family was headed. In 1685 when the temple at Guînes was closed Pierre Trouillard and his congregation left on foot for Cadzand. Here, as in Groede nearby, there were Reformed communities with strong ties to the Huguenots of Guînes and Calais. A Walloon refugee community had been formed here earlier in the century and Reformed priests moved between these different congregations. It would have been these contacts, as well as the belief that there was land to be farmed here, that would have persuaded Pierre Jacob and Suzanne de Vos to risk leaving everything they knew and try their chances here.

Religious refugees did not flee their home country without careful thought and planning. Leaving France was as much a story of migration as it was a tale of Protestant perseverance. It could not have been a decision lightly made. Like all migrants they would have had to consider where they could go, how they could get there, and whether they would be likely to find work there. Most Huguenots decided not to take the risk. They stayed in France, converted to Catholicism for the short term, and hoped that the situation would improve.

I do not know if my ancestors came to Cadzand but I am guessing that they might have. If they had heard that Trouillard and his congregation had arrived here and were welcomed, that there was work to be had or land to be farmed, then Pierre Jacob and Suzanne De Vos might well have decided that it was to Cadzand that they would head.

As with many of the villages that I have explored on this walk, and of which I had expectations that they would somehow reveal some-

thing of the histories that I was seeking, Cadzand proves as unrelenting. It is a neat little place with a bakery, a restaurant and a B&B. In the street I pass a wooden contraption to hold horses while being shod by the farrier. There is a one street name in French. The church is locked. I talk briefly to a man walking his dog who tells me it will be open in the afternoon for an exhibition of paintings. It is only ten o'clock. I walk down to the mill and have coffee in the only café in the town. The elderly proprietess is friendly. She was born and raised here but knows very little about the Huguenot refugees. She offers to call a man in Breskens who might know more, but then can't find his contact details. I thank her for trying.

I leave Cadzand without having connected to it in any way. That is not the fault of the place, I have made little effort to scratch its surface. It has been ten days on the walk and my imagination and enthusiasm are wearing a little thin. I wanted to feel how far it was to walk from Vieille-Eglise to here, and now I know.

Outside of the town there is a crossroad and I study the map for the most interesting route to Breskens. A cyclist with a wagon in tow stops to offer help and directs me to the path on the sea dike. It turns out to be good advice and for the next few hours I walk in a stiff breeze along the North Sea dike. The wind gets stronger as I round the headland. From here I can see the western mouth of the river Scheldt or Schelde in Dutch. I reach a black and white light-house and sit down, pleased to get out of the wind. Across the water, in the distance, is Vlissingen.

The Huguenots who left aboard De Schelde from the harbour of Vlissingen would have sailed across this river mouth and out into the channel. They would have seen land on this side and possibly this lighthouse. I realize, as I look at this expanse of water, that I am looking at the place of my forebears' departure. It is from here that we left Europe. Sitting in the shade of the lighthouse and out of the wind I contemplate this fact. I am no longer in a hurry. From here it will be only a short walk to the passenger ferry at Breskens and the crossing to Vlissingen.

Signing off,
Wendy Morris