

Nowhere

A man, who asked his friend, Spike Milligan “ where are you?” was given the answer; “ Somewhere. You always have to be somewhere.” This doesn’t apply to Holland. In Holland you can be nowhere. In fact there is a lot of nowhere in Holland, You can be in a place, look around and it’s exactly the same as somewhere else in Holland; A flat green plane, a miniature skyline at the horizon with several spires, like sharpened pencils, pointing up. A testimony to the multiple religions Holland traditionally accommodated. Some houses scattered about, one interchangeable with the other for lack of compelling features, a few trees, a moat, and a fence and there it ends.

Except that it doesn’t, it never ends. The landscape unfolds with unrelenting similarity as indistinguishable as it did numerous miles ago. When finally you come to a forest you can be pretty sure that behind it this flat green will appear again with provocative nothingness before your eyes. We (the Dutch) have learned to love it, like we’ve learned to love potatoes.

To counteract the destructive boredom of colourlessness we filled our Dutch nursery colouring books with screaming primal-colour crayons. It made us feel that we were somewhere, doing something. (You always ended up with a red cloud, a blue cow and a yellow windmill)

My sister had a ‘steady’ boyfriend, who came along one summer to our rented cottage in the north of Holland in the middle of this unyielding green I just described. My family consisted of my mother, my stepfather and his son, my two older sisters and my older brother and me.

It was raining with a constancy typical of Dutch summers. My brother would stand in front of the window days on end and sing his dismal little song; a dissonant version of ‘I can hear the rain’: “oh, how it’s raining, how it’s raining, I can hear it from my warm bed, I hear the rain singing. How no-one notices any of these sad state of events.”

In this miserable collective family mood we had arguments. “Whose turn is it to peel the potatoes?”

As families invariably prey on outsiders to point out the ills of the world, we collectively turned to the unlucky boyfriend (suitably named; Martin Bold)

He, realising immediately that this was not just a potato peeling issue, refused.

A family row ensued, wholly inappropriate to the scale of the matter and the setting. My brother silently stayed at the window, his eyes glazing over as if to soft-focus the racket around him.

Martin took his stuff and stormed out the door. My sister was praised excessively for letting him go.

At this point it is notoriously difficult to storm out into nowhere and end-up somewhere, so he walked the mercilessly flat grassland for about an hour (without looking back, we checked) Every now and then, one of us would go to the window and we would call out; ” is he still there? “

And the answer would invariably be; “Yes, I can still see him” or “ He’s still out there” and then “I can still see his head!”

When he finally disappeared there was no sigh of relief, just a muted acknowledgement that nothing was achieved and nothing lost.

His lack of imprint on the landscape had left the pasture more hostile and more horizontal than ever before.