

# The Demer Poems

pour mon ami, Luc Piron, peintre

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## The River (A Prologue)



2

the genus loci  
a divinity, they said  
when was that?

3

like glass beads...  
the water wells up –  
like pearls  
    glittering in the sun

    the source is sacred  
remember Devos  
who protects it:  
    THE FLOW  
    THE BEGINNING

Dark River  
Tam ara

4

the ancient ones were makers of  
glass beads  
glittering bracelets  
they were makers of  
edged pottery

the vases and bowls  
keep the water  
the beads reflect  
the flowing light

5

there was a time  
when poets kept  
the secret  
transmitting it  
from mouth to mouth

in the owl-light  
I see them return  
Water searchers  
Searchers of knowledge

They look for the source  
And they search the mounding  
mouth and meeting place  
space of merger  
mixing water with water –

recurrent fusion  
active unity

6

that's all gone  
even fortifications are different now  
but archeologists and historians  
still speak of  
oppida, & look  
for traces...

a concrete structure  
left in the landscape  
is covered by plants  
The painter said  
that bats hide inside



all forms of life – still sacred  
even though the rulers forgot  
and the ruled  
do not dare to remember

and yet, we see  
the golden foliage  
silvery reflections  
on the water

more eternal and precious  
than all the gold silver bronze coltan &  
rare earths that men crave for

forget the images  
on TV

branches, boughs of a tree  
in front of me  
I touch the bark  
Finger it, briefly  
before I head on  
Stumbling, 'cross stumps  
A pipit's call  
echoing in my ears

10

there are those who ascribe to them  
a religion centered on ethics  
They respected nature, I read –  
And they studied it

11

and holly, mistletoe and  
groves of oak trees  
exist

and the divine – everywhere

the *triskele*  
points to *the third*

The *third* links the opposites –  
Ask Hauser.

Transformation matters –  
Ask Chuangtzu ask Cage ask old Karl Marx

Wechselwirkung

interference between  
what is different  
affects day and night  
heat and cold  
attraction as well as  
rejection

the river was rectified  
it brought large floods

13

there was a time  
when woodlands, streams and lakes  
were their temples

they cherished  
the creative principle:

THE OLD  
GIVES BIRTH TO THE NEW

Brecht could have said this

Mao, too

14

okay then,  
be a bard  
know the tradition!

15

returning to the conqueror's account  
I read of  
large fortified settlements  
None remained  
Even the graves are forgotten

O rulers of another time  
your golden collars  
golden shoes  
where are they now?  
Buried in the dust  
with your ashes

where the vine grew  
centuries ago  
a wall, of ironstone,  
protects the orchard with its apple trees

16

and the poet  
did he, too,  
speak of those  
protected by the yew?

And wasn't it  
Hekataios  
who thought he knew  
the secrets of the North?

Take care,  
not everything you read  
is buttressed  
by factual experience

As for the yew,  
eat the seeds  
not the berries

In the old times,  
people were salt miners  
makers of iron tools  
craftsmen who worked with  
precious metals  
They were glass-makers  
traders and farmers  
Then came cloth-making  
and vanished again

But did you see  
the breweries along the Albalie  
and the Fisher Street  
and the Quay in Diest  
and the trees further away  
lined up in regular fashion  
along the riverside?

Once, they fetched  
the water upstream  
for their blackish-brown  
barley brew  
and discarded the dregs –  
mostly a mass of spent yeast –  
further downstream  
It turned the water  
greyish white and foamy

18

« les entrepreneurs » were good at  
making money  
and, by the way,  
de volksgezondheid kapotmaken  
was just a side effect, never intended  
but they didn't care

and the priests taught young kids that much,  
THE SOCIALISTS ARE  
OF THE DEVIL, MY DEAR

It left the people  
sprakeloos

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Song of the Dark River

1

the trees, a world  
that needs no cage, no frame  
they grow and grow  
producing wrinkles in their bark  
inhaling the sun  
vines stretch and rise  
up and up  
and further up, towards the blue  
and light and darkness intermingle

This is the forest's secret heart  
the hole  
the whole enclosing just that much:  
THE SPRING  
THEY TRIED TO TAME  
arched opening  
red bricks, a railing  
a blind window  
inserted by the architect  
into this weighty structure

a heavy load they placed  
on a small part of the world  
trying to put a frame around it  
enclosing it, they thought –  
the beginning of a river

but the sun, the sunlit leaves  
the water running away  
belie their intention

2

dense foliage  
shadowy spots, others  
warmed by the sun

while, in the darkness,  
half-hidden,  
water continues to run

quietly, quietly  
talking to the leaves  
conversing strangely with the birds

whispering  
“here I am”  
as a wanderer passes by

3

the water runs on  
followed by other water  
more  
more  
more and more

the tree-pipit's sound stirs the silence  
a bullfinch responds from somewhere

the sunlight paints  
reflections

there is no wind  
it's a warm day  
in the forest

4

a lighting, almost –  
    its brightness  
catches the eye

I accompany the water  
on its course  
in that deep furrow  
cut, by snow when it melts

    and rushes –  
adding volume and speed  
to the brook

Large trunks  
emerge from the ground  
    by its side  
mosses  
    vines  
        foliage  
what climbs us  
    climbs up  
on this rough bark

On a summer day  
the heat floods in  
from fields further away

The trees, interspersed –  
not planted close  
to each other

You never know  
what is the work of man  
or the urge of nature

Daphne might have bathed here  
the wind moves through nettles

they seem to queue up  
  leaning over, seeking the light  
    where the water course  
      widens  
a pool, almost –  
one half of it,  
      in the shade  
    the other part,  
      in the sunlight

It is darkness that swallows  
  the brook  
as it flows on –  
  soon invisible  
    in the thicket,  
  a cover of leaves

a symphony of leaves –  
breathing the sunlight –  
languishing  
in the warm air...

A forest is a chaotic  
arrangement of order –  
chance  
asserts itself

and the logic  
of striving  
towards the light

Wind,  
the droppings of birds,  
determined the location  
of every beginning

The weather mattered –  
heat and cold drought and moisture  
when these trees these  
thistles thorns and flowers  
were about to be

She, the goddess of the river  
hid the water –  
kissed it when it welled up –  
blessed its course  
in this paradise

and now,  
 a giant tree  
 so big, so sturdy  
 so deeply marked  
 by time

The seasons came and went –  
 hail snow bitter frost the heat of summer  
 the rain ravaged  
 its bark

It assumed its own character  
 It assumed its expression  
 It tells –  
 its tale

Across the brook  
 I see the big wing  
 of a tree bird,  
 a large  
 bird-like tree  
 sheltering the location

Magic of place  
 Enchantment  
 owed to a sheltered place

The harmony of  
 sun and shade  
 the quietness  
 of an afternoon  
 interrupted briefly, it seems,  
 by a robin

8

the smell of blueberries  
and dry wood  
reaches the nose  
Grasses cover  
the woodland soil in what is

a bright,  
sunny spot  
in the wilderness

when the brook turns  
into a large brook, an incipient  
river  
it is tamed

Man has straightened it  
Man has forced it  
into a straitjacket

The trees push closer  
approaching this little canal  
that is full of mirrored trunks and twigs  
of leaves that float  
and others  
stirred by the wind

Somewhere, a tree-trunk has fallen  
across the water course  
and formed a bridge

The red bricks of a house  
light up  
in the distance

A junction in the forest –  
that's what it is.  
The trees, densely around it.  
In the interstices –  
the light of day.

The brightness of an open field  
shines up, further away.  
Accentuating  
the blackness of the trunks.

The water, of the brook,  
is full of light.  
It is bright and white  
as it rushes past the  
curve of the bend

accepting the tribute  
of the small tributary  
that enters and  
supplies its share

11

there it is again  
the little water course  
there it runs on, darkly,  
in its strange bed  
leaves swim in the current  
transported away  
into a blacker space

But the grasses  
by the side of the brook  
are bathed  
in light

12

we deceive ourselves  
the eye does, again and again –  
it places us  
deep in the forest  
sunlight lights up  
shrubs & wild grasses  
a stretch of the brook

Was this where we met  
two thousand years ago  
to be close to the goddess –  
the holy water?

Did the people –  
did bards  
assemble here?

The world, no peaceful place, it is true  
But they longed for it

13

the clearances, les clairières  
occupées par des *oppida*, des *vicus*  
Kirwan wrote

Their everyday objects of use  
scattered now  
by the storm of history

the small brook  
 traverses the landscape  
 skirts Ketsingen  
 the waterkasteel van Renesse  
 the village of 's Heerenelderen  
 with its castle  
 Alt-Hoeselt, Bilzen,  
 then Diepenbeek  
 finally, Hasselt

the *jenever* industry was blooming here  
 in the nineteenth century  
 the *manufacture de céramiques*  
 was churning out glazed bricks and tiles  
 a few years ago, they closed Philips,  
 and now pride themselves  
 of a 'versity

In the nineteenth century  
 it was industry that provided  
 wages sorely needed  
 by people in  
 villages and towns  
 I had its price  
 How often  
 did fish float  
 on the dark waters of the river!  
 How often  
 did children hear  
 the *Demer manneken* cry  
 when they listened for it  
 in the night  
 thinking of punishment –  
 a stern ghost  
 until they discovered  
 their likeness in it:  
 a wounded soul  
 despairing and terrified  
 at the sight of the fish

15

there were times  
when the Schelde meandered,  
when floods opened  
ways for the water  
and it changed its course

The historian speaks of jungles  
*portés par un sol marécageux*

Was this also true of  
the region of Diest  
and of Demermonde?

You sense it still – the morass  
beneath the pastures

Traversing the stillness  
you see wetlands, set aside  
for large flocks of birds

16

Bridges –  
Again and again, bridges –

The presence of man  
in nature

He bridges it, he relates  
He absorbs, incorporates  
Makes rivers straight.  
Building dykes.  
Crossing the water  
on bridges.

The barges, however, are gone,  
that navigated the Demer.

“The stranger... does not fail to ignore  
 the spirit of shortsightedness  
 and of destruction  
 which appears to be, in civilized countries,  
 the inheritance  
 left for forest land”

He speaks of “*exploitations abusives*”

Kirwan –

Pointing to Sweden, Norway,  
 to America –

Was that also true here  
 in this part of Flanders,  
 in the Hageland?  
 What remains  
 of former beauty?  
 What was lost  
 forever?

When the painter went upstream  
 with his camera...  
 came across a tree  
 its furrowed bark

an undiscovered country  
 as it lay there  
 in the water –  
 a bridge  
 for the ants

an alder rose up high  
next to the rivulet  
its bark – almost white, in the sun  
The trunk ended  
    in a fork  
    three branches  
        rose skywards  
twigs  
    branched off, sideways  
        craving the light  
            of the empty space  
                above the water

almost motionless.  
a duck, with her ducklings  
    rested on the river  
    Its rippled surface  
        mirrored trees  
        and the blue  
            that their tops  
                seemed to pierce

heard the water rush past –  
saw it rise,  
there – next to  
the knotty tree  
its splintered bark  
with the hole in it  
a cave for goblins  
hiding place  
for bees

The woodlark sang  
The sun touched the leaves  
Creating shadows  
on the tree-trunks  
and below –  
on the ferns  
that covered the ground

Arched bridges  
The Romans made them,  
and railway engineers  
of the nineteenth century...

As a shallow brook, it appears to me,  
the Demer.  
Boulders protrude from the  
river's surface  
Trees present white blossoms.  
Their branches – like arches, too.  
Gracefully, they rise  
to some height  
then thirst  
for the ground again...

21

in the village  
the rivulet becomes a canal  
Stonewalls,  
    heaped up  
    on both sides  
while the water rushes  
    over a sequence of stairs  
Small cascades are formed  
    by these hindrances  
    that brake,  
        then accelerate  
                    its course

Behind a fence, you see  
    modest houses.  
    Trees signal their presence.  
A narrow road runs parallel  
    to the stream.

for ever and ever it goes on –  
 a young river,  
     tamed  
         & made straight  
 Did they want to  
     rush it?  
 Was it part of their imagination  
     or lack of it  
 when they drew up the plan?  
 Was there a plan?  
     Or just blind action –  
 the need, they thought,  
     of pastures –  
     land for their cattle  
     that was too moist  
         they said  
 because of inundations  
     that came to pass  
     when the snow was melting  
         further upstream  
     or when the rain was heavy  
         in summer

Today, come March,  
 the snow still melts  
     the rains are heavier than ever  
 And it was in Diest  
     that the Demer flooded the city  
     The pastures upstram  
     behind the new dykes  
     of course weren't inundated

almost devoured  
by the foliage, its lush greens  
it seemed to me,  
the old bridge –  
arched structure  
made of red bricks:  
perhaps they built it for a railway that is gone  
or a tram  
that connected villages...  
The works left by man disappear –  
It's a question of time, merely  
and subconsciously,  
we know that, of course  
although we try  
to forget

The river that passes under the bridge  
does not dream  
does not remember  
does not forget

It simply runs on  
completing its stretch  
of the cycle

24

how blue it is  
on such days –  
the sky  
on an early morning  
in mid-summer

a few white lines –  
modern hieroglyphs:  
they are the mark left  
by engine exhausts  
of a few plants

But the cranes  
have passed here  
months ago  
in search of swamps and  
suitable riversides  
that hardly exist any longer  
since most of the  
wetlands vanished

the vegetation that follows the river  
such a narrow corridor of wild grasses  
a make-belief world that suggests  
harmony between man and nature

If such harmony ever existed  
it's gone – for good.

there it was again  
as you followed it, on its way –  
the Hageland's stream:  
    like a ditch, almost –  
Its bed: slightly curved  
and accompanied  
    by a row of tall alders  
        Their foliage: dense  
        The south side of the trunks:  
            bathed in light  
On the other side of the river  
    you saw a meadow  
and further away,  
    hemmed in by this meadow  
        and the edge of a forest,  
            grain grew –  
                was it barley? was it wheat?

The sun filled the sky  
    on this summer day  
    with a mellow light  
and right there,  
        in front of you  
        flies emitted  
                their buzzing sound  
The birds, however,  
    were almost silent now

when the pastures widened  
    being more frequent now  
the river still ran straight  
    An unperturbed sky rested  
        on the flat land  
The line of the forest  
    formed the horizon  
    Cattle grazed calmly  
    A fence parted  
        what was private  
        from public land...

The narrow zone  
    reserved for the water course  
and the wild plants that grew  
    on both sides of it  
    caught our attention.  
“How vigorous and diverse they are!”  
    you shouted  
    “How beautiful  
    compared with that pasture  
        and the field of maize!”  
    I nodded.  
Even the soldierly arranged  
    line of birch trees  
        paled beside these wild flowers  
        and leaves of grass

27

today they fuck  
    in cars  
and old guys visit brothels  
    with startling names  
        that are lined up, by the roadside  
the neon signs flash, at night  
    spelling out  
        their shrill message

But there was a time  
when lovers lay  
    in the wild grass  
        by the Demer  
Their eyes  
    tracing the clouds  
that were chasing each other  
    in the immense blue  
        of a Flemish sky

I saw a willow  
in the wilderness,  
    at the edge  
    of the woods.  
I saw an improvised bridge  
    Was it made of wood? Was it  
    a wooden structure?

The roof of a house emerged  
    amid the dense greenery –  
half-hidden by a fir tree  
    hidden by shrubs, as well

The weeping willow  
    lets her hair hang down  
    like Rapunzel  
It is clear that she is a deity, too  
    And a female one,  
                                at that.

    Mirrored in the stream's surface  
the tree colors the water  
    and turns it green.  
It is difficult to tell the water  
    from the green world  
                                around it.

peaceful peaceful peaceful  
 and, oh so slow, is the water  
 when it widens the bed  
 when it streams patiently in this bed  
 forming islands of algae that float  
 here  
 and there  
 close  
 to the riverside

The shrubs and grasses on the banks  
 form strange shapes  
 Some seem to me  
 like oversized hedgehogs  
 like the wild hairdo  
 of a Struwelpeter  
 Like the grass-green camouflage  
 of sheep  
 And the islands of algae  
 on the river  
 seem to mirror them  
 in the tranquil water

The trunks of young trees  
 rise to the sky  
 How poor and boring they look  
 as they stand their,  
 as if to attention,  
 lined up,  
 like sheepish recruits

Just compare them, my love  
 with the charm of  
 unchecked undergrowth

a gulf course  
     adjacent to a small river  
 suggests a sort of peace  
 But what other peace  
 than that of  
     relaxed competition?  
 We cannot let go of it  
     anymore, it seems –  
 it persecutes  
     the unbeliever  
     & speaks to him of  
 punishment & some failure  
     he will encounter some day  
     when he least expects it

As the game goes on, the wheel turns.  
 As the wheel turns, history proceeds.  
 The wheel, driven by gusts of wind,  
     produces energy.  
 The world we have made,  
     relies on it.  
 Energetically, they play  
     their games.  
 The river, quietly, runs on.  
     Unperturbed.

How closely they are together –  
the civilization we made and the  
simile of nature  
A make-believe world  
    full of echos of paradise  
A space reserved  
for a brook  
    that became a stream  
and a stream  
    that turns into a river

Such varied plant-life,  
concentrated in a narrow corridor!  
Well, relatively speaking, it's varied,  
    you object.

And are there deer?  
Bears? Wolves, even?  
O no, it's flies and ants  
    and some fish in the water  
    an occasional squirrel or hare  
But that's so much already, these days  
And don't forget all those birds,  
    and the butterflies.

the factory, of course, inevitable  
even in a region they term  
“subject to deindustrialization”  
I see the structure emerge  
    behind the shrubbery  
Like a smelly canal, that’s how  
    the river looks now  
/& an ugly bridge  
    made of concrete  
    crosses it

But the trees  
are as beautiful as ever  
their foliage intermingling  
    as branches and leaves  
        search the sunlight  
striving upwards  
                and sideways  
into unclaimed space

Below them,  
    the water flows...

and the wooden huts –  
les cabanes?  
Don't know who lives here  
or what else they're for.

A beech tree rises  
next to one of these cabins  
A willow tree – right next  
to the beech.  
Shrubs. Grasses.  
And ducks on the river.  
As it flows round the bend  
the trees follow  
A silvery green ribbon  
that stirs in the wind

If you care  
listen to the breeze  
And the cries of the birds  
that break the silence  
of summer

in Diest they have the dock  
 they have the canal  
 And the Demer, that *Hagelandse* stream  
 is made to dive  
 and thus crosses the path  
 of the lifelines, they say  
 of our economy  
 which we don't own  
 which we suspect of  
 producing death  
 far too often

just think of the motorbikes  
 that seduce young men  
 to risk their lives on sunny Sunday mornings  
 in early spring  
 Or the pesticides that poison our food  
 Asbestos agent-orange Round-up DDT PCBs  
 Not to forget the arsenals  
 of wars to come  
 and those fought now  
 (Monsieur Louis, MP in Brussels  
 can tell you a story  
 about Mali)

And yet  
 the architecture we see  
 is nice

almost constructivist  
 and truly modern, the critic said  
 When he praised the elegance  
 of the curved arches of the bridge,  
 I thought of the qualities  
 of steel & concrete –  
 their inbuilt frailty

35

the sky of Flanders  
heavy above the land  
filled with the weight of clouds  
engulfing distant trees in darkness

A tree erupts from the darkness  
It is tall  
Its trunk – white  
Its foliage, dense and magnificent

A loner, it towers  
above the field of wheat  
that is awaiting the harvest

The flies are buzzing  
close above the water  
that drags on slowly  
up around the bend

36

Returning, a little later  
to this secluded spot  
thought that a thunderstorm  
was approaching

I seemed to smell it  
as gusts of wind  
blew through the leaves  
of the poplars

and the grove,  
on the other side of the river –  
with that elm  
standing right by the wayside –  
had turned dark  
and strange  
and uninviting

algae on the river  
that is as straight as a canal

It's not so clean, it seems  
you muttered  
O no dear, the farmers discharge  
the piss of pigs and cows on the fields  
THEIR STABLES  
TOO LARGE  
TOO MANY ANIMALS PER HECTAR  
It's that easy  
The equation doesn't work

And still, how idyllic they seemed to us  
a few buildings that clustered here  
a farm  
that includes  
what once was  
a water mill

If you look  
you can still see  
the wheel

38

endless water –  
always in a straitjacket  
always straight  
The horizon – a line of clouds  
above the silhouette of the trees  
When a branch joins the river  
there is a pool-like bulge  
The mirror widens  
Though brown almost,  
it reflects the light  
of the sky.

39

just a canal it is  
at the Lansart Mill

a stagnant  
straight  
stretch of water

The sleepy houses  
did not change that much  
They huddle there, amid the greenery,  
around the water course  
that let their builders choose  
this site in other times  
when water power mattered more  
than nowadays

We have forgotten this –  
That small brooks count  
That rivulets can drive  
a mighty wheel

40

a dyke on one side  
poplars, on the other –  
Their trunks are partly lighted by the sun  
the leaves don't tremble in the quiet air  
The river's lively bubbling jumps and falls  
are gone  
It is not here that run it would  
as quickly as a brook  
It took instead the lazy clouds  
as its example  
that rest above  
and do not seem to pass

41

And then it curves again  
and the landscape turns almost romantic  
and there are cirrus clouds in the sky  
on a quiet morning

42

and as late August approaches  
we see the first mist  
and spinwebs in the fields  
and the dew covers the shrubs  
and trees are blacker  
in front of the rose-colored  
parts of the sky  
and the water, the water  
reflects the rose color  
and a bit of blue amid the algae

I've seen white dots –  
blossoms of small wildflowers  
on the river bank

I've seen the river  
disappear in the distant mist

and the shrubs and trees  
thirsted for water  
and approached it, more and more

and covered its surface  
with their shadowy image

44

in the afternoon  
the sun warmed the cluster of birch trees  
by the riverside  
it warmed the grasses

and the fish, in the river,  
that got slow  
and lazy

In the afternoon  
it put a warm glow  
on the elms

and the river, the river  
was tired  
and sleepily,  
it moved on

45

the curves are fascinating –  
the curves still left  
in this place full of straitjackets:

the country of Mondriaan –  
of squares and rectangles  
of allotments, plots, properties  
that are defined by merchants  
and geometers

You find it everywhere, nowadays,  
this country of Mondriaan  
But Mondriaan's vision is gone  
The depth he suspected  
below the geometric surface

And so, the bends remain for us  
and let us see the depth of a movement  
that breathes life

sometimes the sky is filled  
with sandbanks  
with ripples of water

waves,  
rushing to a shore –  
the surf: its repeated attacks –

sometimes, the sky is dramatic  
and the wind speeds up  
and the clouds turn blacker

and the flat land cowers closer to the horizon  
and the white blossoms of the grass  
wave and swing defiantly

and the trees stir  
and the water assumes  
a cold, strange look

\* \* \*

sometimes, however  
the sky is soft,  
the clouds are tender  
Lightly they sail on  
while the trees yearn for rain

On such afternoons  
I have seen the Demer  
as quiet as a lake  
as still as a mirror  
that mirrors nothing  
but silent leaves

when the expanse of the wetland widens,  
interspersed with groups of trees as it is,  
you sense the emptiness of this spot  
despite the sounds from the highway  
or the hooting  
of a far-off train

It is a quiet place  
despite these distant sounds  
that break the stillness

It is a place of fish jumping  
a place of hundreds of birds

chirping, calling, pecking –

immersed in their activity  
that remains hidden  
from our eyes

Time seems to pass slowly  
in such places,  
I believe

on one side, topped by clouds,  
there is the forest –  
separated from the river  
by a belt of weeds

on the other side of the water  
poplars line it  
They are the outposts  
of another forest, it seems

They face the river  
They guard it  
as good guardians would  
And the river feeds them water, in return

In Diest, at the Terlingen  
(which means, The Dices)  
a river called the Black Brook  
merges, with the Demer  
And on rainy days  
the torrent rushes past  
the pillars of the bridge  
where the two meet

It is then that the river becomes wider  
And soon, also, more tranquil again  
And its course,  
freed of attempts at rectification  
freed of  
straitjackets,  
suddenly seems gentle

Other bends  
than those designed by geometers  
refresh the heart  
And the vegetation is lush –  
as if sensing the liberation

But soon enough  
I saw dykes again.

50

Birch trees in the morning sun,  
a staccato of white trunks.  
Carved into the land, the bed of the river.  
Vapor rises from its surface

Dramatic clouds  
in the evening  
A tree leans over. It bowed  
to the force of the wind  
Other trees have followed suit  
The horizon shakes and trembles  
The river is covered by darkness  
It vanishes  
out of sight

where formerly the old railroad crossed  
on the bridge made of steel  
the crest of the dykes  
seems as natural as dunes

The tranquil waters of the Demer move  
around a curve  
covered by darkness.

A mellow sand, and yet –  
how steep and insurmountable  
the riverbanks are,  
in this place  
At least for the rafter,  
should he attempt to land

Softly, the river meanders –  
its bed, a deep furrow,  
in the land.

A trail, apparent as a  
light trace,  
follows the Demer's course

Wild grasses galore –  
Densely they cover  
the riverbank,

On the left bank,  
the dark shadow of trees  
approach the water.

On the right side,  
a field. Trees  
are lined up, at a distance.

54

The large bend:  
When it comes, it surprises.  
A U-turn, almost –  
Amid a sea of grass.

Then, there is  
the strange house.  
A Gothic house, as they say.  
Red brick. Three stories & the attic.  
Solemn it seems to look  
at the river.  
A wall of concrete protects the site.  
A staircase leads down  
to the water.  
On the other side  
the dark silhouette of a tree  
almost touches the sky.

It is then that the landscape offers again  
what is almost the sight  
of a wilderness.  
Like a snake, the river moves on.  
Like a jungle, the trees  
push toward it.  
They are willows and elms  
of great height  
and impressive volume.  
On the opposite side  
stones protect the river bank.  
The slope is steep.  
A meadow, nearby,  
is studded with trees.

There it is, before your open eyes:  
A river, enclosed in dykes.  
Kept in its bed  
as long as floods remain modest.

And yet, this river,  
of medium width,  
has chosen detours  
and curves, and other curves

and corn grows on the soil  
inundated in spring  
and pastures  
flank its course

an occasional barn  
testifies of human purposes  
grassland  
demands use and  
exploitation, people say  
They leave the river banks to the untamed  
To grasshoppers butterflies and bees  
And the greenfinch jubilates  
at the edge of the woods  
and the linnet  
sings its song.

In the morning hours  
I saw a lark  
up in the sky  
nearly motionless  
above the wetland

each rain turns the brown Demer  
even more brownish  
and there is plenty of rain in Flanders  
On summer days  
it flows more rapidly  
when it rains upstream  
In spring, the melting  
ice propels it  
They say the river is fast –  
its torrents, not without risk  
How difficult it must have been  
to pull barges  
from Demermonde way up to Aarschot  
and then, even further,  
to Diest.

So much light,  
    on the birch trees  
    that line the alley.  
Musical notes that stud  
    the horizon.  
A faint blue sky  
    surrounds the tree-tops.  
Translucent almost, they seem to be.  
On such a morning  
the world seems expectant.  
    The fields await  
    the heat of the day.  
    The river is calm.  
And here and there  
    the mist that's rising  
        from the water  
    lets dewdrops fall  
    on violet blossoms

still deeply carved, into the landscape –  
the water course.

Today, it doesn't seem so fast.

A day in late summer  
has its apparent effect.

No clouds in the sky.

The shadows – long and precise,  
on an early morning.

The corn –  
awaits the harvest.

The grasses –  
take in the warmth.

The corn fields  
have no birds, they say.  
But the grassland has.

62

late summer –  
autumn colors begin to appear  
A pheasant crows,  
greeting the day

The rippled surface  
of the stream glistens  
as the water flows  
round the bend

Morning mist rises  
from its surface  
and floats away  
to grasses, wet and heavy

63

when the fog forms a white  
impenetrable bank  
above the meadow  
it is like a vision  
of the unknown

For a split second  
the sleepy river does not move  
It breathes and exhales  
the stillness  
It embraces  
the shadows

half-hidden by trees –  
the village church  
It's at the outskirts not in the center  
of the hamlet  
The pastures touch it  
The river runs  
past the meadows.  
A few houses  
reveal their location:  
Their roofs appear  
amid the foliage

Such places breathe a peace  
that is rare today  
But it is the backside  
of reality, you know  
Main street, with its  
rushing traffic.  
is on the other side

The *witte villa* out of sight  
The birds don't know  
of Neuengamme  
The distance, too large  
and the succession of generations  
blurred the memory

Where are you heading,  
old wanderer in search of  
peace of mind  
and why is your mind  
haunted by what you  
forgot?

at night, constant sound  
of a super highway

the lights of a lone car  
on a country road  
pierce the dark

an owl cries, and then –  
the answer of another owl  
at the edge of the woods

villages sink in silence  
in a bedroom – whispers :  
Be quiet, little ones –  
The *Demer manneken...*

Ah, you are kiddin'  
There are no ghosts!  
It's just the voice of the water  
in the back of the house

ravaged by Roman legions, Vikings, Franks,  
then Spanish armies, the inquisition, Austrians,  
the French, Germans. Again Germans, and today  
pesticides, unemployment, the poverty of those  
pushed out of jobs  
while wages are under pressure  
democratic rights

how quiet you are !  
A land, flat and tamed –  
“civilization,” they say  
left its mark  
agricultural requirements  
the logic of landed property,  
of traffic planning,  
town planning  
asserts itself

Hageland, Flemish land,  
or rather, Brabant – is there  
a difference?

He has walked along your river,  
the artist –  
he has seen the river  
through the lens of his camera  
and with wide open eyes

68

There was a time  
when the lights went out  
and the occupier's hand rested heavily  
on hearts, on minds,  
on starved & tired bodies

do you remember those  
shot when the bloodhounds arrived  
in night and fog ?

69

two aspens  
in the early morning light  
the one, so tall and slender  
and the other –short

they pierce, it seems,  
the wide and empty sky  
their branches – frail, the leaves  
are trembling slightly, in the faintest breeze

the roots – take water, from the moistness  
of the riverside  
shrubs huddle, close to them  
their leaves – a-glistening in the sun

It is their image – mirrored in the water's surface  
that dwarfed the trunks, and let them tremble, too  
The slanted, piercing, tender aspen trees  
are now mere shadows, floating on the river



clouds in the sky  
announce rain  
the water of the river  
looks cold / though it is summer

it is brown,  
    then gray  
it is almost  
    olive

and the crest of the waves,  
    of all the ripples glow  
    as if molten lead  
        or fluid silver

There is the complex of mills –  
    And a bridge, as well.  
There is an embankment –  
    It parts the water.

It lets it race  
    to the mills.  
It lets it race  
    to the bridge.

The stones of the embankment,  
    covered by algae,  
    show a pattern:  
    It is light brown, and dark olive.

A tree grows next to the bridge.  
    It is tall and compact,  
        its foliage, dense –  
    a wind-swept, brown form.

Another tree  
    stands close to it.  
    Already  
        leafless.

A pale light illuminates  
the pillars of the bridge,  
and the solid base of the road  
that leads up to it.

The pale light is also visible  
on the house  
that forms an appendix  
to the mill buildings.

They are old. And a duke ordered  
their construction.  
Willem de Croy – his name.  
That was long ago.

The holes that lead the water  
to the water wheels –  
sucking it in –  
are black as night.

The crow-stepped gable  
to the left  
and the three pointed gables  
to the right

adorn the sight of these ancient buildings  
that housed gristmills,  
a bark mill for the tanneries  
and a malt mill / for the breweries

Thinking of the dues they must have paid  
to the duke,  
we are reminded of  
persistent continuity.

Again, beyond Aarschot,  
 the water curves –  
 searching, snakelike,  
 its way to the / "monding":

the meeting  
 with the other river  
 that it will  
 merge with

kissing it on the mouth  
 in a moonlit night  
 after some meandering  
 through the meadows of Flanders

I wonder whether  
 barley adorns the fields  
 and whether they still make  
 de *Aarschotse Bruine*

dark brown  
 and strong  
 like the beer  
 of the Trappist monks

I also wonder whether they still need the bark  
 of all the poplars, for the tanneries  
 and whether the birds  
 still look for Hagelandse grapes

The shapes of clouds that I see  
 I liken to cigars  
 and what mars the impression  
 is just the smell of tobacco in the lucid air

73

a V is formed  
at the junction  
The Dijle creeps through the opening  
left by the bridge  
It is eager for added water  
It is longing  
for a boost –  
energy that will propel it  
on its course to the Schelde

The Demer gives in  
It does not quarrel

The river goddess  
is a peaceful ghost

(March/April 2013)

Epilogue

fifty years ago,  
we could skate  
from Aarschot to Diest,  
the man said.  
Like a lake, that's how it was.  
Ice on the flooded meadows  
and on the river!  
It was a paradise  
for youngsters like us.  
Today, you look in vain  
for nature here.  
It changed so much!

\* \* \*

and yet, he discovered it –  
the painter did  
and you, his contemporary,  
you see it, too – the willows by the water  
groups of trees, studding a meadow  
you encounter the water mills  
you hear the silence  
of secluded spots  
you listen  
to cries  
of birds

But how much  
will still be there  
    for others to see, in a decade?  
They add houses,  
    they think they beautify  
    the village  
        when they modernize  
The landscape changes  
and it always did,  
    in every century  
    for thousands, for millions of years  
Nature has it ways, its dynamics  
Man always intervened  
    Is he wiser today?



