

### *Jungle*

When a young writer is confronted with the demise of his publishing house, he sees his commercial possibilities diminish. He clings to every assignment that comes along. It starts with the design of a new level for a popular game, but soon the assignments take him for a hallucinatory ride across the planet.

In Madrid he discovers the underground hideouts of the outcasts of the city, in surreal Kazakhstan he is trapped in an uproar that is as frightening as it is absurd, until he finally washes up on the shores of apocalyptic Tokyo.

*Jungle* is a novel about our turbulent times and a meditation on the madness of the world. But above all *Jungle* tries to make sense of it all.

### *Specifics*

*Jungle* was published in January 2016

256 pages

### *Agency*

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*Jungle*

Lebowski Agency, 2016

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© Dutch translation: Thijs van Nimwegen, 2016

© Lebowski Agency, Amsterdam 2016

Cover design: Peter de Lange

Photograph of the author: © Geertje De Waegeneer

Typesetting: Crius Group, Hulshout

[www.lebowskipublishers.nl](http://www.lebowskipublishers.nl)

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## An Elephant Can't Swallow a Hedgehog

During those few weeks of writing behind a computer screen, Brussels, without me, has revealed itself to be a shameless city. I wouldn't be surprised if the street map, seen from above, reads 'fuck you'.

There are even more demonstrations, sometimes two at the same time, mingling and infecting each other's slogans, people shouting things like: 'We want more less, we want more less.' But mostly there's an increase in civil disobedience. Rabble's work can be seen everywhere. The parliament is treated to his version of the political semicircle. He has created a grand scene on the wall opposite the building: the plush benches populated by horrific creatures, blood red letters scratched all over their bodies, forming supplications to vote for them. Their mugs grinning with pain, cheeks stained with tears, each and every one of them stripped of any self-respect. And over the lectern, dripping with sperm, the slogan ARBEIT MACHT NORMAL.

All over the city other graffiti artists are following his example, with fake election posters appearing everywhere, showing politicians making promises to govern the country out of a sense of nostalgia for the old days and a fear of what's to come. Or saying there's no place for asylum see-

kers, and definitely not in their own, 500 square meter villas. A different poster for a different party bears the slogan OUR MORAL SUPERIORITY IS SUPERIOR TO THEIR MORAL SUPERIORITY. WHY? BECAUSE. But many don't see this as a parody, and it even increases the party's popularity.

But soon the disruptive nature of these actions causes a physical backlash. It starts small. By giving themselves the same dimensions, bicyclists protest the ever increasing space cars are claiming for themselves. They ride around with aluminum frames shaped like cars resting on their shoulders, and together they form traffic jams. But this protest evokes so much violence that the harnesses become shields against enraged drivers.

Thus the Brussels protests reach a next phase. First, the reactions evoked ranged from surprise to amusement, but now every one of them meets with pure, unrestrained aggression. This phenomenon is not unique to Brussels, it's a constant factor in times of resistance. All too often, those feeling criticized or insulted see this as a legitimization for the use of violence. As if a bruised ego really counts as a medical condition, making one's actions legally immune. The most embarrassing example is the backlash after an announcement made by the association Good Hatred, a group of women dedicated to ending sexual intimidation in the streets by encouraging other women to yawn ostentatiously and loudly whenever an uncalled-for comment is made. It's all pretty harmless, but it has an unforeseen effect.

Reports are starting to come in of these women subse-



quently being physically assaulted. Some arrests are made, and the men taken into custody state that they felt provoked, not by the women's disinterest, but by the suggestion that they would be boring.

A public debate flares up, predictable as ever, about how these women were kind of provoking it, how it would have been better if they had shut up, how they showed little respect to the men who approached them disrespectfully. How women should know better, how staying polite yourself is always the best defense. Because apparently everybody can be made fun of, except for those threatening with violence.

The association Good Hatred, for its part, is flooded with venomous messages saying women can't take a compliment anymore and that it's all in good fun. This last statement causes the association Good Hatred to go to court, in order to completely subvert that argument. During a press conference their lawyer states that they are demanding a panel of professional comedians to be formed.

'Based on their expertise, they will determine if a sexist joke is in fact funny. When it turns out this is not the case, this official assessment can be used in a new trial. Seeing as experts are already appointed to make every important decision, be it economical, medical or otherwise, why not for something as dangerous as humor?'

As always, the government does not respond, assuming it will all blow over. That's what they're thinking. Hoping. But the appeal is deemed admissible and soon we'll be able to look forward to trials featuring men in the witness stand being asked to read their jokes out loud.

‘And then, your honor, I said: do you have a license for such big tits?’

This action by the association Good Hatred also causes some international response and the organization is aided by a gang of hackers calling themselves ‘The Anarchist Atheist Amigos’ (‘The Anarchist Atheist Amigos’ for short, because they hate abbreviations). They manage to hack several men’s webcams and take pictures of their faces while they’re looking at porn websites. These pictures appear on posters captioned: **THE STREET IS NOT A SCREEN, YOU FRUSTRATED LOSER.**

But a very radical act of resistance in Brussels is claimed by a group calling itself ‘An elephant can’t swallow a hedgehog’. They’re an organization resisting the presence of neutral spaces. Very fitting in a city like Brussels, where all the names of the streets surrounding the powerhouse of political and financial institutions refer to the 1830 revolt against the Dutch rule: Revolution Street and Freedom Square, Provisional Government Street and Barricade Square (formerly Orange Square), and exactly in these pompously revolutionary sounding streets, rallies and demonstrations are officially prohibited.

But the most important neutral space is still Market Square. When we’re talking demonstrations, that is. Any and every commercial festivity is more than welcome, like an all-winter nativity scene featuring dolls of Jesus and his entourage in the shade of an enormous Christmas tree, decorated with lights provided by an energy company;

the canvas bearing the company's name has the biggest lamp. As if the birth of the savior, 2000 years ago, was accomplished by connecting a power cable to the crib. Featuring the names of all the other sponsors all around, because this religion is presented to you by...

So it could be that resistance is completely admissible, if it were to make a profit. However, the group 'An elephant can't swallow a hedgehog' elects to use some Garden Graffiti in order to coerce true neutrality. How they manage to do that is up for speculation. But in between the thousands of cobblestones, they've planted many mutated seeds, seeds that germinate in a single night, transforming the market square into an unkempt botanical garden.

At first, the mayor is not sure how to respond, condemning the act as vandalism but falteringly adding something about how tourists prefer a stone market over a park made of grass. A statement immediately negated by international interest and an increase in visitors. After that, the mayor claims there's some connection between the action and his plans for a family-friendly town center, and that it should actually be acclaimed. And just for a moment 'An elephant can't swallow a hedgehog' turns into the sort of protest the government likes best: cute, and not too loud. Perfectly fit to abuse for their own purposes.

However, soon afterwards, the true goal of 'An elephant can't swallow a hedgehog' is revealed, when the first visitors start having allergic reactions to the plants and have to be carted off to hospitals. Some of them remain in critical condition for days. Market Square is preemptively

evacuated and passers-by are denied entrance, in order to give the ever present soldiers something to do. Several media outlets receive an untraceable letter from 'An elephant can't swallow a hedgehog', stating 'Now it's a truly neutral space'. I'm trying to contact Mona through the ever slowing internet. But I know I will have to go outside to be able to meet her.

On a rainy Wednesday I'm sauntering across Brouckère Square once again, the Coca-Cola-billboard now showing the message: THIRSTY? TOUGH LUCK. The square itself has been made over by activists: they've smashed a large hole in the tarmac and stuck a tall tube made of Perspex in it. A pillar filled with rotting garbage, a monument to our civilization, summarizing it. A foul smell is spreading from the top, like fireplace smoke out of a chimney. Already the base of the pillar has been covered in dumped garbage bags, a fertile soil for this tree of garbage. Once again untouched by the police. Thus the city is declining magnificently, removed from logic, disowned by it. Destroyed by madness. The way an entire population can be infected by a psychotic urge to kill each other; in that way everybody here seems to be affected by ongoing resistance and possessed by absurdity.

I run into small groups of people who are in a state of complete, delightful bewilderment. In New Street, the largest shopping street, I pass by The Anti-Customers, who will form queues whenever a new store opens its doors. They will then start to tell terrible things to the people actually waiting, stories about diseases and wars. Anti-pro-

paganda, to make the shoppers depressed, depriving them of any urge to consume. The stores themselves can't do a thing, because they aren't harassing the customers with slanderous criticism, they're just telling stories.

I spot people who have transformed themselves in order to stay invisible for the security cameras, for example by using small LED lamps, glued just above their eyebrows; that way their heads show up brightly lit on the security screens. Others have painted geometrical shapes on their cheeks, so no computer can match their faces to its database.

I don't find Mona until that night, after hours of aimless wandering. I'm listening to a speech held on the stairs of the Stock Exchange, by somebody calling himself a Radical Softie. 'We have to be fucking proud that we're not proud of ourselves. We should feel fine about feeling so bad, because we're doing so fine and others are doing so badly. We're fucking amazingly unique creatures because of our refusal to feel special. Hurray for us, because we're calm. Who's gonna join me? We're calm, we're calm. You don't have to, but you can. You're not hurting my feelings by not chanting with me, 'cause I'm the master of putting things into perspective. We're calm, we're calm.'

Mona slips beside me without making a noise and before I can say anything, she's whispering something in my ear.

'Are you in the mood?'

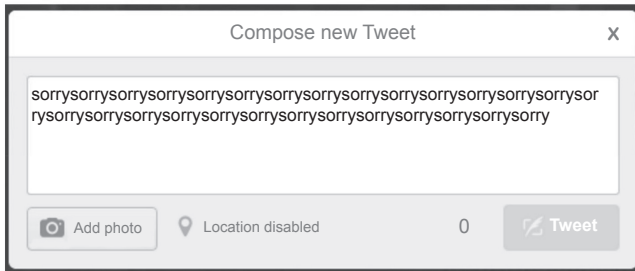
I nod, and once again she and I end up in some impossible house. And just like Rabble once predicted, the nau-

sea has disappeared completely and I'm even experiencing a slight buzz. That might be the reason why Mona hangs around these places so often, maybe this is the only kind of place where she can still experience delight, her body adapted to the impossible. If that's the case, I'm experiencing a tiny slice of it and already I can taste the addiction it causes. The fear of getting lost transformed into lust for another attempt.

Tonight the house chosen isn't much different from the first place she ever brought me to. As if we're celebrating some anniversary. Plopped down on the only sofa, I almost want to ask her how she brought me and Peter Tusch in touch. But by now I know her well enough to be certain that she'd completely deny it. Not in order to stay modest, but in order to keep the outside world out of this remote place as much as possible. Which is also why I don't ask her all about how this getting lost works exactly, how Rabble can end up in the same place when he starts roaming around by himself. I'm guessing the starting point determines it all. Nor do I ask her why Rabble keeps us waiting so long this time. Instead I bend over, not saying another word, kissing her on the lips with total abandon. I can't make myself any clearer. I think. I hope.

## A Sustained Error

For over six days there's a silence, no assignments, no requests. Convinced that I've hurt Mona, I'm typing tweets like this one, but I'm not posting them.



And then, suddenly, an e-mail appears. It's from a company unknown to me, based in Brussels' European Quarter. All it contains is a request to call them. I'm not able to determine whether or not Mona made this possible.

I call them right away and get connected to a secretary who doesn't have a clue what I'm talking about. There's no mention of a contact person in the e-mail, so she can't put

me through. So she decides to cradle the phone against her shoulder and loudly yell my name to all those present in the office, asking if anybody wants to speak to me. She then tells me in a soft voice that somebody indeed needs me.

In a thick French accent, a woman tells me that their company is in the employ of the European Union and how they deliver publications in the 1000 languages of the continent. This time they're supposed to compile information on the upcoming world expo in Astana, Kazakhstan's new capital. Or, as she calls it, 'a kit', even though she tells me it contains 400 pages of stuffy content like diagrams and projected numbers of visitors. They want me to write an introduction, about ten pages to coax the reader into reading the rest of it. Cautiously, I ask her how they found me.

'Through the grapevine,' she tells me. This feeds my suspicions that Mona is involved and makes me feel even guiltier. 'Because you have a thing with cities, right?'

The person on the phone then walks me through the assignment. Always an awkward moment, because of the dreaded p-word.

'Look here, it can definitely be funny, but it shouldn't make fun of something or someone. And it can definitely be critical, but not offensive. More like guilty pleasures and such. Kind of like a touristy lifestyle-report, but don't mention any names of shops or restaurants, because we're not allowed to advertise. We're actually looking for something... playful, you see?'

I let out a sigh and agree. 'No problem. And... the fee?'



Now she lets out a sigh and I can hear her rummaging through papers. 'One moment... I'll ask my supervisor.'

Just like the secretary, she then does a half-assed job of covering the phone and yells out her question loudly in French, as if yelling into a void. She lets out another sigh and starts speaking to me again.

'We'll arrange your flight and your hotel. You'll be paid after delivery of the text.'

'Okay. I was just wondering if an advance might be possible.'

'No,' she says decisively.

'Are you saying no, or is your supervisor saying no?'

'We are saying no. And don't forget to arrange a visa.'

She then hangs up while I'm asking a question, so I just find out for myself how the hell I'm supposed to get to Kazakhstan.

Getting a visa is easier said than done as well. To get a note of admittance glued in your passport, you first have to fill out 28 questions, write a motivation in English and leave your passport containing 35 euros at the consulate for a week.

The consulate is in a beautiful building at the edge of the Ter Kamerenbos. The room for visa is a dirty little basement underneath the patio. Half of the space is filled by a bookcase containing all the works by Kazakh president-for-life Nursultan Nazarbayev. To my untrained eye the only differences between the volumes are the angles of his gaze, because on every book there's a picture of the president staring into a corner. So this is the man who just

can't resist being reelected by 97 percent of the voters all the time, and therefore has stated that he has no choice but to stay in power, ever since the independence from Russia in 1991.

Because of my destination, Schiphol seems more fitting, in any case more so than Zaventem. This Dutch airport likes to cultivate its futuristic image, but is actually using it as an excuse to leave all the work to the traveler. Their philosophy is that 'You're able to book your own journey, so you can arrange your own seat, your own upgrade and your own luggage'. After your boarding card has been printed and a baggage sticker has been wrapped around the handle, you have to put your suitcase on the luggage belt yourself, into a tube that looks like an incubator to make suitcases hatch and have tiny living creatures come out, with crumpled clothes for bodies and toothbrushes for arms. I wouldn't be surprised if in a while, passengers will have to give the safety instructions themselves.

Throughout the airport there's a similar atmosphere of deceptive perfection. As if to fill the traveler with feelings of guilt about leaving and not staying in the indoor hotel forever and visiting the indoor library before going to bed.

The only task still carried out by professionals is checking for the possession of explosives. But seeing as half of the passengers on this flight to Almaty are blind drunk and have buried their empty tax-free bottles in the planters, this leads to a lot of uncoordinated movements, shameless line jumping and bizarre conversations.

‘Ma’am. You can’t bring that cart with you past this line.’

‘Yes, I know.’ As she pushes the cart onwards.

A young man with an attempt at a moustache has to be supported by a staff member while another one pats him down for knives and metal. For standing upright in the body scanner with his feet on the feet marks turns out to be an impossible combination. Afterwards, the same guy starts to babble at me about how we’re going to crash.

‘Is that the plane over there? It’s way too small and we’re way too many. We’re gonna crash. We’re all gonna die.’

Yet when the doors open he runs up right away and even before we take off he’s sleeping peacefully.

Every time I take a long flight across an ocean or a body of land I’m haunted by the thought that the apocalypse will start at that very moment. That we’ll land in a destroyed world, with only ourselves as the last survivors, forced to stick together and repopulate the earth. But I never thought about the opposite, about the apocalypse just affecting the airplane. Never until flight MH17 was taken out, an occurrence almost like a proof of the laws of nature, about how two conflicting phenomena can’t exist within the same space, these being war and tourism.

After a – for my part – sleepless seven-hour flight, we arrive at the airport of Almaty, Kazakhstan’s former capital. The previously blind drunk man staggers towards the exit, the hangover crumpling his face. At border control he’s asked, briskly and with some physical coercion, to wait on a

bench. I myself get to stand in line. Another 30 passengers in front of me. But I'm in no hurry. It's now 2 AM and my connecting flight won't depart until the afternoon.

The customs officer in his small bullet proof booth seems aware of my abundance of spare time and is in no hurry to beckon the next person in line forward. After every passport check he's staring towards nothing catatonically, but whenever someone fills the space in front of him, he inexorably sends them packing. Then right away he beckons them towards him again, annoyed, as if he's the king of this one by two meter empire, granting an audience. Finally it's my turn.

I offer him my passport and get a finger pointing upward in return. I lift my head up, looking straight into a small security camera. A type I've only ever seen as an infographic, but probably something that has been out of production for years. Which makes me doubt if it's even functioning. However, the customs officer doesn't doubt for a moment and every time I lower my gaze to his eyes I'm shown the same finger. I have to answer his questions straight into the lens, not looking at him. About 15 questions, and half of them is a repeat of the previous one.

'How long?'

'One week.'

'Okay. How long?'

'One week.'

'Yes, I know. How long?'

Because it might be a trick question. 'One week.'

'I understand. How long?'

I can feel his anger rising, looking him in the eyes right now would be a bad idea. I keep staring at that camera, imagining how this entire conversation will become part of an educational kit for prospective spies, as a textbook example of psychological warfare. Instead of answering again, I repeat his question. 'How long?'

'No, how long?'

Had I owned a white flag, I would be waving it like crazy right now. I want to look him in the eyes, beg him to explain what he means. I picture myself being sent away again, being put on the bench next to the drunk in this no man's land, having to stay there for days because, like an idiot, I have forgotten to keep the phone number of the Belgian embassy with me. Surviving on whatever stewardesses and pilots toss in the trash bins. Being bludgeoned back into the corner by security when I've gone haggard and started accosting anybody who looks somewhat European. A bang on the glass rouses me from my thoughts, he's pressing my motivation letter against the glass and repeats: 'How long?' Only then I notice the strange intonation in his question and I realize he might be trying to pronounce something entirely different. I'm risking freaking him out completely and getting myself jailed, but I try it anyway.

'Do you mean alone?'

'Yes, oawloon.'

Once again I nod like crazy and I'm expecting to be let through. But even after this nerve-wracking encounter I still have to answer some more questions.

‘Purpose? Vacation? Work?’

I tell him I’m here for work reasons, to write something about the upcoming expo. He writes it all down and frowns when I mention the EU, to conjure up some diplomatic immunity. I think. I hope. I then have to confirm my hotel’s address and I’m asked to slowly spin around for the camera. A request I haven’t seen anybody before me accede to. But I do it anyway, because everybody’s staring at me. After this humiliation I finally get to move on.

By now it’s 2:30 AM, the last passengers have been checked, the luggage belt stops moving and the customs officers are leaving their posts. The only people left are a line of travelers near the lost luggage stand. At the front is a family of four, with a cart holding a sizeable load of luggage. The woman is effortlessly switching back and forth between Kazakh and English in order to locate the rest, while the man, exhausted, dressed like an American cliché, is trying to keep the two worked up boys under control. But his commands are interrupted by his own yawns and have little effect on the screaming kids. One last sliding door and I’m in the arrival hall. I’m greeted by six cab drivers all trying to offer me a ride at the same time, but I need not go outside, I need to take the escalator up to the departure hall, to get to my flight to Astana.

The entertainment options at Almaty airport are decidedly more limited than those at Schiphol. No hotels or casinos, just rows of benches in front of a television. Offered to you by LG. The flat screens are mounted back to back, one side showing a romantic movie and the other

*ultimate cage fighting*. Like a partition between the male and the female section. The sounds are interwoven, a lovemaking scene in the movie is being supported by the sounds of fists hitting skin and moans of pain. I'm trying to sleep away the remaining hours, laying on hard metal chairs, but I'm kept awake by the unending passage of a sweeper machine and the presence of other reclining bodies. Another nine hours to while away.

Throughout the night and the next morning I stay upstairs; down below, sleeping is not an option. Down there the benches are occupied by the cab drivers. Whenever I appear, they all jump up at the same time. Soon, I start to summarize my original answer – 'No, thanks, I don't need to go anywhere' – by shaking my head vehemently. I have a similar dialogue with the owner of the pizzeria near the entrance, who uses the only English word he knows to greet me.

'Meat. Meat.'

After a while it starts to sound more like a cry for some physical contact. I'm trying to avoid all of them, during every trip to the only serviceable toilet on the downstairs floor, where I attempt to wipe off the itching and the sweat.

Besides the benches there are three soft seats upstairs, of the kind you'd expect in your grandmother's living room. They belong to a coffee bar. Reserved for those filling up on caffeine. If you doze off, the owner will wake you up with a rough shake and send you off to one of the metal monstrosities. Apart from coffee, the only other beverage

available is an energy drink bearing the confusing name 'Hot Dog'.

Another seven hours to go and I'm starting to get dazed. It's like the headache is sliding down my forehead and coating my face. There's just a few other passengers left, a mix of travelers and beggars, sprawling over benches for the most part, their luggage serving as an extension of their makeshift beds, their coats used as pillows. From time to time a head pops up and I can see a few seconds of confusion about the surroundings – then it slides out of view again.

A breakfast place next to the domestic flights hall stays open all night, the first A of their 'Kpyaccahbi' is shaped like the Eiffel Tower, but inside the only other reference to France is the fundamental ennui of the waitress's gaze.

Another five hours to go and I've let go of any hope of falling asleep. Morning has broken and the first flights of the day are being announced. Including one to Astana, but not mine. The terminal gets crowded, filling up with sounds and vowels beyond my comprehension. The waitress of the faux Paris-croissanterie is relieved of duty without having sold anything. She's going home to gaze at nothing at the kitchen table.

I'm really suffering now. Too tired to read, too tired to mooch around, too crowded to lay down, the lights too bright to keep my eyes open. I'm massaging my head just to keep going. But I can't. I really can't do it anymore. Really. I'm becoming detached from my body, my skin is just a shell with my interior slinking away inside of it.



Finally my flight appears on the screen, still hours before departure. But I get to go somewhere else. To a place past the checkpoint for domestic flights. The same benches over there, the same screens. Still showing boxing matches and wrestling, preceded by a 12+ warning and interrupted by infomercials labeled 16+.

Half past one and I finally get to board the plane. Together with barely fifteen others. Most people who have to go from Almaty to Astana take the train, a twenty-hour trip, but affordable. The flight takes a little over an hour, if you don't count in half a night of waiting, of course. An entire row of soft chairs is at my disposal, but here too I'm not granted any sleep. To squeeze everything into that short flight time, there's an unending parade of stewardesses, quickly passing by with food and drinks. Just before landing they clean up. Like a failed attempt at making it feel as real as possible. Which soon turns out to be the perfect preparation for my arrival in Astana, the new capital.

For there it appears, like a sustained error in the endless steppes. It's not a place for civilians, it's a place for admirers. It's hardly a city anyway, more like an urban backdrop to a nonsensical opera composed by the president, and this week I'm an extra. The buildings still under construction, hidden behind fences with – appropriately – theatre curtains painted on them, waiting for the premiere in 2017.

If it ever gets completed, that is.

For a similar megalomaniacal project in Myanmar is already three years behind schedule. Right now, in the new capital Naypyidaw, the internet connection is better

than the water supply and there are more imported animals living in its finished zoo than there are immigrated civilians in its unfinished buildings. There's even less hope of completion for the announced construction of Capital Cairo, somewhere in the Egyptian desert. It has the biggest potential so far; the size of Singapore, the chances of survival of Troy.

Right away I'm besieged by a herd of cab drivers, as if they took the plane with me. This time I agree, because I have little choice. Almaty, the former capital, might have a subway, consisting of one line and two stops, even though nobody uses it because of the constant risk of earthquakes, but this brand new city doesn't have a subway or a tram.

It's one of the first odd conclusions I draw during this trip: this place gets to organize the world expo for sustainable energy, but at the same time it's the most unlikely location for such an event. With its freeways being constructed right through the city center, four-wheel-drives and SUV's whizzing by filled with cheap oil - curtesy of the country's abundant wells - and its impossible to cross six-lane streets, that still have signs saying WATCH OUT, CHILDREN PLAYING. The only public transport consists of equally polluting buses and there are no bike lanes. Capital of a country that was once home to the Aral Sea, the seventh biggest lake in the world, now a salt flat as a result of the excess production of cotton. It has dried out so quickly that there are still ships rusting away on dry land. As if a giant whirlwind lifted them from far off seas and dropped them here. The former fishermen are now camel

herders. Add to that the indelible consequences of nuclear testing in the south of the country. Soon the whole expo-to-be, the reason why I'm here, starts to feel like a smoke screen for big business as usual. But this does not seem like a fitting opening for the text I'm assigned to write. Not promotional or playful enough.

'What are you doing here, actually?' the cab driver asks me in English.

'Good question,' I'm thinking to myself, but I tell him I'm here to work.

During the eighteen kilometers between the airport and the city limits, I get a view of the backstage of this urban opera. Unpaved roads are crawling to clusters of houses with a shared water well, tentacles of the only asphalt road into the city. The cab driver explains these villages are inhabited by those who, during the day, are sculpting all these constructions into the heavens but leave the city again at dusk.

The car takes a sharp right, the last straight line into the city, a road like a runway with street lights on both sides and in the center as far as the eye can see. After about two kilometers we pass by empty parking lots and emptier bus stops, but there are no houses. There are also functioning traffic lights at not yet existing intersections.

Like Las Vegas – a far-off golden casino, rising from the desert – Astana has made its entry road into a façade of grandeur, adorned with the most prestigious ornaments. In this case that means an immense crescent shaped apart-

ment building with a gaping hole in the middle, like an open gate, offering a view of the statue of the golden egg (which has a back story just as boring as it looks) and beyond that, the presidential palace (to make sure there's no doubt about the why of this city). On the other side of the gate stands the Khan Shatyr, a tent which has been declared the biggest in the world (a claim which will be disproven often during my stay), supported by cables hooked up to a 200-meter pillar. Within this extraordinary structure, as could be expected: a shopping center. The top floor holds a swimming pool, an amusement park, a dinosaur-exhibit including three mounted dinosaur skeletons and a view of other huge shopping centers. All this information I have gathered beforehand, during my sporadic attempts at research, in the quiet hope of writing down that first sentence that will make the rest of the text accumulate, like sand forming a dune. But I don't have anything yet.

He stops right in front of my final destination, the Hilton Garden Inn. I pay the fare and thank him. He doesn't drive off, not a clue why not. I take my voucher from my backpack, printed out in English and Russian, because Google Translate refuses to learn Kazakh.

In its loftiness, the hotel fits its surroundings of recently built giants. Its direct neighbor is Asia Park, yet another shopping center, with Khan Satyr nine hundred meters beyond that. I find it comforting that my week can consist of concentric walks around my hotel, getting cheap fast-food at the different food courts surrounding it, mostly

laying in that soft bed, switching between the only two English-language channels. Oh, that bed, right now the most appealing thought - save for a shower - especially after a sleepless night in toxic, sweat-drenched clothes. Apart from that delightful prospect, I'm comforting myself with the thought of gathering my text with the help of cooperative hotel employees. For the first time in a long while I'm hopeful everything will be okay.

Because of my ultimate exhaustion and temporary carelessness I fail to notice the darkness in the lobby and all the floors above it. It's only when I can't open the front doors that all hope fades. Against my better judgment I'm shaking the door handles violently, until a man dressed in black appears from a side door and walks towards me resolutely. To defend my desperate act I hold up my voucher.

'Me guest, me guest,' I call out. An almost primitive call, profiling myself as the least likely guest of a four-star-business-hotel.

'Not open, not open,' he tells me.

But I'm so desperate for some rest that I'm trying to negotiate with him, as if it's up to him. I'm trying to make clear I don't care there's no personnel and no towels. I brought some myself, and enough deodorant to skip showers for a week. I want to beg him to give me that room, even if there's no bed or Wi-Fi. I paid for a room, so I'm entitled to a room, that's how my reasoning goes, like a teenaged diva. I want to ensure him I won't break anything and won't come in the way of the builders. But before I can

utter a word, he pushes me away like the dirty white homeless person I am. I hurry back to the cab, still holding the voucher like a flapping rag, hoping he won't drive off. The small wheels of my suitcase can't deal with the rough surface and the suitcase is wagging like a fat tail. Even more sweat-drenched and exhausted I get in the back seat again.

'Did you know hotel not finished yet?' Which also explains why he did not drive away.

'I know now,' I answer.

'You need place, I know place.'

Lacking any alternative I give him a *carte blanche* to take me anywhere. At the mercy of a stranger in a city too young to have a memory. He's driving deeper into the center, past the biggest (this time not of the world, but of Central-Asia, a great trick to still label everything the biggest) mosque (conceived and designed by the president and a couple of famous architects, of course), past the American embassy which is completely constructed with materials from the United States, and built by American workers. To avoid it being jammed full of bugging devices, like the embassy in Moscow was during construction. Across a bridge with a construction site to the right, a town next to the city, shielded from the rest of it, only connected to the outside world through canals and boats. Though none of the future ten thousand inhabitants will ever have to leave that place, because everything will be available there, from schools to hospitals. A completely autonomously functioning gated community. Total security through total isolation.

An idea stolen from the prestigious project La Cité de Fleuve, built on two man-made islands in the Congo River, just next to the center of Kinshasa and in 2008 announced as the Dubai of dark Africa. It's been mostly vacant until now. On Google Maps it's shown in red dotted lines, as if it's off limits virtually as well. Ever since Peter Tusch talked to me about it in New York, I've found more and more examples of this unstoppable trend, to forget about the city and just build something smaller next to it, for select audiences. To make all the advantages of the metropolis available to those who can afford it, and keep all the disadvantages to those left behind.

A left turn and yet another five hundred meters along a wide boulevard before we arrive at a cluster of high buildings, three of them on a common pedestal, three floors high. This is it. The first floor is a labyrinth of stores like Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, the third floor is an indoor concrete park, the pillars are trees, the stairwells are benches, not a plant in sight. And a gym, apparently for the model agency that's housed in the building. On our way to the elevator we pass a line of twenty rail-thin girls in black leggings and white T-shirts, supervised by a shouting man clapping his hands to the beat. I can't hear what the cab driver is explaining because of the echo of their high heels, the man's roaring voice and the loud clapping.

After a door with a coded lock and a narrow hallway there's another elevator, leading directly to an apartment on the twenty-third floor, my quarters for the week. Four rooms that can each be rented out separately. The owner

is introduced to me as his aunt. I get to have the most expensive room, the only one that has no bunk beds. I'm fine with everything. But if they'd offer me a lukewarm bath with a roll of duct tape to keep my head above the water, I'd be fine with that too. Overjoyed to be finally left alone, I crawl into the shower, and from there I crawl into my bed.



## Review by *Flanders Today*

### **Inner city**

*Jungle* is the fifth novel by Flemish author, theatre director and stand-up comedian Joost Vandecasteele. His fascination with contemporary culture and society is an integral part of all of his writing; *Jungle's* emphasis on cities, games and the internet makes it trademark Vandecasteele.

The story follows a struggling author as he tries to get any writing job going after he's dropped by his publisher. He ends up collaborating on a new video game, but things quickly get out of hand, leading him on a whirlwind voyage across the globe. It's a satirical dystopia that offers a glimpse of things to come.

Brussels, New York, Tokyo, Madrid and Kazakhstan are just a few of the places *Jungle's* protagonist visits in an attempt to find meaning in a world on the brink of destruction.

'Our urban metropolis is a recent historical development,' Vandecasteele says, 'and people are still trying to find a way to live in harmony within it. They're still struggling with the noise, chaos and abundance of impulses. It's difficult to live your life if you're constantly surrounded by other people, aggression and pollution.'

### **A better way**

He believes in a form of architectural psychology, he says, in that people's ways of life are influenced by the city. 'You're confronted with so many social situations, and that's what fascinates me about cities; they bring out the best and worst in people.'

And where there's struggle, there's also resistance. 'I find it very odd that people proclaim that our society is the best there has ever been,' he says. 'To me, resistance is refusing to accept what's offered to us. There's always a better way; it just takes time and effort.'

*Jungle* is Vandecasteele's attempt to show the limits of aggression, given that we live in an age where anger, in cities especially, has become commonplace. 'Making someone angry is easy,' he says, 'but if you really want to create change, confuse them. Make them think.'

And that's something *Jungle* does: It confuses and defies readers by making them ponder the fine line between fact and fiction.

Vandecasteele's love for pulp fiction and video games is apparent in the novel, giving us a tale full of wacky situations. 'Games have had an impressive evolution, narratively speaking,' he says. 'They create amazing and intricate worlds with mesmerising and challenging storylines, but people still don't take them seriously. They're still seen as something for teenage nerds.'

Games and the internet distort reality but are at the same time an integral part of society, creating a blurred vision of the world. Incorporating these contemporary

elements into Flemish fiction is something few authors do.

‘That’s why I think it’s important to add these elements to my novels,’ says Vandecasteele, 36. ‘If we keep on writing the same novels over and over, for the same type of readers, then literature will eventually become extinct. We have to shake things up and challenge people.’

Literature, he says, shouldn’t be ‘some artsy form of escapism’ because people and times change: ‘Every generation has its stories; we should stop writing solely for their mums and dads.’

### **Dying medium**

Vandecasteele loves telling stories through different media and is currently working on an adventure game called ‘Happy Volcano’, a project of the Nederlands Letteren Fonds that finds game developers and authors working together.

He’s also a firm believer that literature should be exciting. ‘TV used to be a dying medium where we’d seen and heard everything,’ he says, ‘but suddenly it changed course. *Netflix* and *HBO*, for example, dared to do something different, which revived the medium. Nowadays film directors are voluntarily going to work in television, whereas it used to be considered second rate.’

Literature needs to reassess its goals in the same way, he says. It will never be able to compete with screens, ‘so they should work together and transform the medium instead of creating an either/or situation. Literature is wallowing in self-pity, begging people to buy an actual book so that authors stay in business.’

‘The benefit of literature,’ he adds, ‘is that you can unravel ideas, worlds and situations for a fraction of the price of a movie. And yet no one does this in Flanders. Here, small ideas and pretty penmanship thrive.’

Vandecasteele’s novels are full of intricate ideas and surreal situations. *Jungle*, however, is a novel of ideas with a strong social conscience. It’s original, fast-paced and confuses, inspires and entertains at every turn. Although some sections read more like a column than a novel, and the characters occasionally seem one-dimensional, it’s still one of the more exhilarating experiences in Flemish fiction right now.

## BIOGRAPHY

Joost Vandecasteele (1979) is one of the most influential writers of his generation. For his debut collection *Hoe de wereld perfect funtioneert zonder mij* he was awarded the Flemish First Novel Award. His novels *Opnieuw en opnieuw en opnieuw* and *Massa* were nominated for the BNG Literature Prize. Vandecasteele is a columnist for *Het Parool* and a well-known stand-up comedian; in Fall 2016 his new comedy series will premiere on national television.

Vandecasteele is currently working on his new novel *Nog (Still)*.

## Quotes

‘Fastpaced, sometimes hilarious, but above all disturbing’  
*De Morgen*

‘A unique novel’ *NRC Handelsblad*

‘Joost Vandecasteele is something unique in modern Flemish literature’ *De Standaard der Letteren*

‘Vandecasteele’s novels are full of intricate ideas and surreal situations. *Jungle*, however, is a novel of ideas with a strong social conscience. It’s original, fast-paced and confuses, inspires and entertains at every turn’ *Flanders Today*