

# The Café Lafayette

**Rob van Kranenburg**

**(Photos by Kitty de Preeuw)**

To Dylan Thomas and his colour of saying, and Oshin and Nathan.  
Café Botteltje, 03.15, Oostende, 8/8/1999

I am a worrying man. But I am not without faith. Grant  
me that. I am a fool, though. I know.  
And when I took the Seacat to London.  
A sunny Saturday morn it was, it wasn't  
like I felt like Captain Cook or Charlie Moss,  
but all the same, I had made contingency plans.  
Living is carrying across.  
The object, or shall I say, the mission of the journey  
was accomplished, I did see Naomi.  
Yes, and spoke to her as she did to me.  
She had a salad for lunch, I -- not trusting the pie of beef --  
had pork.  
A happy chain of travelling events  
led to that blissful reunion, I was  
woken up by a wake-up call that I had  
placed on Friday evening. It got me  
to the station in time, all washed up and  
neatly dressed, teeth brushed, boots  
shined and with a kind disposition  
to my fellow travelers and humanity in general.  
Quite an exception.

The train rode well and well on time,  
the conductor was quite cheerful. Effortlessly  
it rode on and on and when it stopped

Café Lafayette, 04.15, Oostende, 8/8/1999

lo behold! It was Oostende, the name  
on the ticket that I had bought.  
I was content. (as I am now, with a good  
Calvados in the Café Lafayette)  
I was content, not only was I where the boat

was moored, she was still tucked away safe in the harbour,  
merrily whistling her tunes, as fine a vessel as ever there was,  
and to my skilled seafaring eye she looked as if she could make it,  
make it across to London, the place where I was heading.  
Bankside House on Sumner Street, to be exact. And when  
I arrived in Dover, a skilled busdriver made out of the stuff  
that busdrivers should be made off, dropped me off at Dover  
Station, where as if in a dream come true, the train to  
Victoria station was waiting.

Living is carrying across.

I found the subway to Blackfriars, as it was closest  
to Bankside House on Sumner Street, in four minutes flat.  
Setting a yet to be beaten record of finding the way to  
Bankside House, Sumner Street, from Victoria Station,  
and that's an open challenge. Blackfriars, it seemed, was  
just four stops away, four stops on the Eastbound District Line,  
the Westbound does not go near there at all. On Blackfriars  
I rose from the Underground on a street lost to my recollection.  
But I remember turning to the left,  
as one should always do on foreign ground, so if you should  
want to retrace my steps, that should help you.

Home, Ghent, 10/10/1999

Well, I sought it with timbles, I sought it with care,  
I sought it with my eyes wide open, but Sumner Street  
refused to reveal itself, at least, to me. I can't say  
that did bother me much, lots of things refuse to reveal themselves,  
that is, reveal themselves to me. I am blind most of the time,  
blind to opportunity and opportunies as well, I sleep with one eye open  
and I wonder. I worry and wonder, but I am not without faith.  
Grant me that.

Would you believe I rode to Sumner Street on a lorry?  
A lorry as big as a house? Marked 'Cowland Ltd.'? Well I did.  
I got a ride from one of the three workers  
on that street lost to my recollection  
whom I asked directions  
to Bankside House, Sumner Street.

When Captain Cook sailed the Endeavour  
into Brisbane Bay--as it is known now--  
the Aborigines simply kept on fishing, neither afraid  
nor curious, they stared into the waters and never looked up.

It was not until Cook did lower a very small dingy  
and did they respond! On they came charging with  
spears in their hands, clubs and stones held ready.  
The dingy they could read very well: enemy!  
The Endeavour to them was an island, too strange  
to be a boat at all. Islands drift by, why should you bother?  
Why should you look up at all?

When Blanqui stood leaning against a tree  
one fine afternoon in the year where you could still see  
the Palace built by Catharina de Medici  
before it was destroyed by the Communards  
the year of which I speak is 1860  
the place it went down was the Tuileries.  
And as he stood leaning against that tree,  
he watched his men parading. They were revolutionaries.  
They could not parade in the open. So they posed as flaneurs  
on a sunny afternoon. And it was only in their step,  
in their way of walking, that these flaneurs  
became soldiers, soldiers solemnly marching,  
marching to a silent drummer. Le vieux stood silently  
watching. He carried a gun in his pocket.  
The parade dispersed into flaneurs.

The Fukeshu are a funny bunch. They play the flute  
and hide their faces in wooden masks. Masks  
that cover their faces. The Fukeshu are old.  
Centuries ago ronin, that is masterless samurai,  
asked permission to start a religious order. They claimed  
to come from China and their papers were lost  
in a fire. The Shogun granted their request, but in return  
they had to spy for him. They redesigned their swords.  
Their swords became flutes and formidable clubs. Their  
fine and haughty features, they hid in masks of wood.  
They played their flute and overheard intimate conversations.  
Wherever you look, there's always one mask more.  
One more mask, wherever you go.  
Living is carrying across.

As I walk, I keep on mistaking boats for islands  
and islands for boats. I bow to flaneurs and they inform  
me they are soldiers, soldiers you do not bow to,  
soldiers you salute. I tell them I'm sorry. How am I to know?  
How many masks before the core?  
A glimpse of my brothers in the clearing?

A glimpse of my sisters in the sun in the woods in the open.  
Living is carrying across.

And yet, there are days where islands are islands  
and boats will be boats, flaneurs are posing and maskless  
ronin play merry tunes. There are even days, I tell you,  
on which soldiers are willing to be bowed to, willing to be  
bowed to, no need to salute. On such a day you will get  
where you were heading, and you will actually make it in time,  
you will see the one you came for and she will even tell you  
that everything will be fine. And, though you may find this hard, very  
hard, to believe, the train that you missed, you would not want to retrieve.  
On such a day, wherever you're at,  
just ask directions to the Café Lafayette.  
You'll get across.





## **Rob van Kranenburg on "The Café Lafayette"**

The poem narrates (at least, I hope it does) the politics of translation. The Aboriginals could not adequately translate Cook's boat into their ways of seeing (as the Americans mistook drama for news on Halloween eve 1938 when Orson Wells aired his version of 'The War of the Worlds'), Blanqui's parade raised the frightening possibility that marching soldiers and strolling men might be interchangeable and the Fukeshu built themselves on masks. Meaning occurs at the threshold of translating unknown procedures into your own. And in doing this you make sense, but lose the opportunity to let that other way of seeing stand on its own. What I tried to narrate in this poem is my own fear of not being able to read the London territory I visited as I feared that my mental map would not get me where I wanted to go. You don't have to go far to get lost. But sometimes the map is the territory ("the map becomes the territory", Paul Michael Perry) and the boat the Seacat and the lorry marked Cowlands Ltd got me where I wanted to go, a quick visit to an American friend, Naomi Conn Liebler, who was there for a couple of days.

Rob van Kranenburg