

# VOX

INTERVIEW  
SPECIAL

## Seven Summer Interviews



ENGLISH EDITION

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# 'Voor het eerst voelde ik me dokter'



**Desirée Joosten**, AIOS verzekeringsgeneeskunde

Het zat er al van jongs af aan in. Altijd al zorgde ze goed voor de mensen om haar heen. 'Later ga ik mensen beter maken', wist Desirée. Dat ze Geneeskunde ging studeren, stond dan ook al snel vast. Hoewel natuur- en scheikunde haar totaal niet lagen, zette ze door. Dan wordt ze uitgeloot en gaat noodgedwongen Biomedische Wetenschappen studeren. Volhouden. Alles voor dat ene doel. En het lukte Desirée. 'Nu weet ik inmiddels dat je niet iedereen beter kunt maken, maar je kunt wel veel voor iemand betekenen.'

Ze kon bijna niet wachten om met haar co-schappen te beginnen. Eindelijk, na 3 jaar theorie, wachtte de praktijk. Haar eerste plek: interne geneeskunde. 'Dat was het niet', kijkt Desirée terug, 'maar er zouden nog genoeg alternatieven komen.' Haar onderzoeksstage bij gynaecologie bleek al veel interessanter, maar daar viel het leven en werken in het ziekenhuis tegen. 'De continue druk, het onregelmatige leven... Ik zou in de toekomst ook wel een eigen leven willen hebben.... Maar ook in de rest van de co-schappen voelde ik me eigenlijk nergens op m'n plek. Sterker nog, ik had een afkeer van het ziekenhuis gekregen.'

## Grijze generatie

'Toen volgde de twee sociale co-schappen. Ik startte in de Jeugdgezondheidszorg en daar maakte ik letterlijk kennis met het sociale aspect van het vak. Er was genoeg tijd voor mensen, de toegankelijkheid van de artsen was veel groter en ik maakte meteen deel uit van het team. Dit in tegenstelling tot het ziekenhuis; daar was je "maar" de co-assistent. Het tweede co-schap werd ik bij UWV geplaatst. "Het UWV... ? Oh, wat erg!", was mijn reactie. Saai, stoffig, een grijze generatie, mensen op het spreekuur krijgen die toch niet willen werken.... Ook mij waren alle vooroordelen bekend en ik zag er dan ook flink tegenop. Maar, vanaf het moment dat ik binnenstapte, was het te gek. Mijn begeleider die me overal bij betrokken, ik mocht

zelfs meteen mee naar een congres. Mee naar een congres? In al die tijd dat ik in het ziekenhuis werkte, was dat nog nooit voorgekomen, zo "belangrijk" was ik nog nooit geweest.'

## Alle vertrouwen

'De eerste week keek ik mee met een collega, de tweede week deed ik zelf al spreekuren. Alle leeftijden, alle achtergronden en alle klachten zie je. Natuurlijk doe je lichamelijk onderzoek, maar je praat vooral ook met de cliënt. Dat betekent zó veel voor mensen. Voor het eerst voelde ik me dokter. Door mijn leeftijd moeten mensen soms even wennen. Zo stelde ik me in de wachtkamer voor aan een meneer met: 'Hallo, ik ben dokter Desirée Joosten.' In de spreekkamer neemt hij plaats aan mijn

bureau, ik schuif ook aan en hij vraagt: 'Waar is dokter Joosten, komt hij ook nog?' Maar al snel is het oké en nemen mensen je serieus.'

## Kijk verder

'Door mijn ervaringen, heb ik lange tijd getwijfeld of ik de juiste opleiding had gedaan, maar sinds ik ik met de sociale geneeskunde kennismaakte, wist ik: "Ja!". En bij UWV zit ik helemaal op mijn plek. Ik ben de jongste arts van het team, maar hoor er helemaal bij. De begeleiding en openheid zijn fijn, overal staan de deuren open. Het is jammer dat er in de opleiding nauwelijks aandacht is voor dit vakgebied, want het is zo mooi. Ik zou iedereen willen zeggen: 'Er is zo veel meer, kijk eens breder dan naar een specialisme in het ziekenhuis.'

In haar vrije tijd is Desirée vooral buiten te vinden. 'Ik heb een paar ezeltjes en vind het heerlijk om in de moestuin bezig te zijn. Maar ik vind het ook leuk om op pad te gaan. Naar een mooie stad of andere landen ontdekken.'

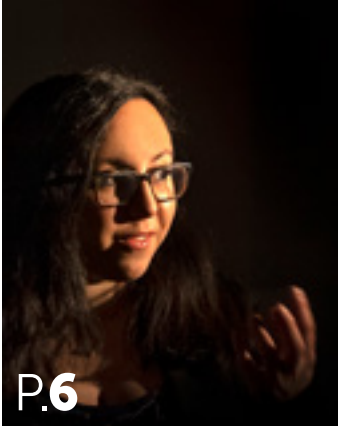


**Ook interesse in een carrière bij UWV?**  
Neem contact met ons op voor de mogelijkheden.

Kijk je graag verder dan diagnose en behandeling?  
**Kijk op [brederperspectief.nl](http://brederperspectief.nl)**







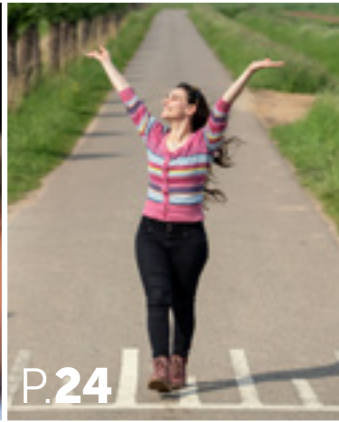
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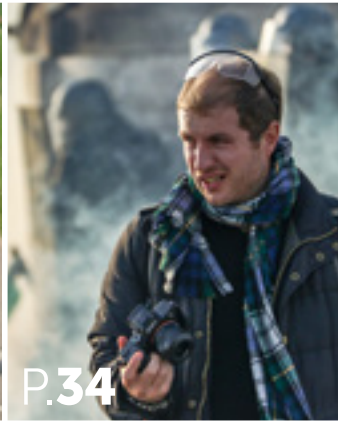
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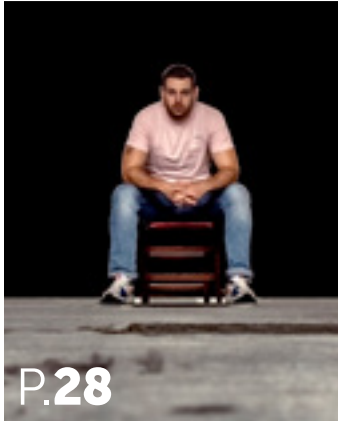
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# EDITORIAL

## MILESTONE

10 April 2019: a date Nijmegen astronomers aren't likely to forget any time soon. On this day the first photograph of a black hole was presented in Brussels. PhD student Sara Issaoun was there. In fact, she took part in the project that led to this astronomical milestone. In this Vox summer special, she shares that the black hole project is probably the best thing she'll ever do (and she's only 25 years old). For Literature lecturer and photographer Wilco Versteeg, the past academic year was no less sensational. Driven by adrenalin, he's attended nearly every weekend demonstration in France. While running through Paris with a Vox journalist,

Versteeg fell and broke his arm. Former T.H.O.R. member Samuel Vermeulen published a book on his bizarre childhood as a child of Bhagwan followers, Syrian Lila Fahham got a job as a researcher at the Nijmegen School of Management, philosopher Lev Avitan is making a name for himself as Campus Poet, Rijksmuseum curator Pieter Roelofs was featured on TV as Rembrandt expert, and Rector Han van Krieken was forced to confront Thierry Baudet.

In seven interviews, eight people share their experiences of the academic year now drawing to an end. Have a great summer!

Annemarie Haverkamp  
Editor in chief Vox



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## ABOVE PAR MIKE FOPPEN



With his arms open and his tongue out, Mike Foppen crossed the finish line of the final stage of the 47th edition of the Batavierenrace for the RU/HAN team. Foppen's performance secured a victory for Nijmegen. Running is something Foppen's good at: he's currently training

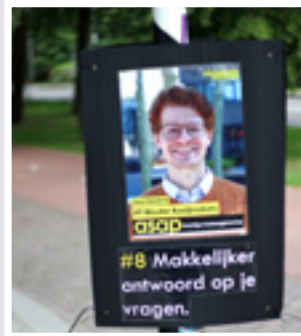
to qualify for the World Championships in Athletics in Qatar in September. The Psychology student believes he's most likely to qualify for the five thousand metres. And he's already looking forward to the Olympic Games in Tokyo in 2020. "The Olympic Games are my ultimate goal, if I continue to improve at the same rate as this past year, that is."

## NOTE TAKEN

**"Nijmegen, pink? Nijmegen is not pink. It's conservative. You people just lean back and don't realise gay rights are once again on the decline. You have to stay on top of things."**

According to Zimbabwean LGBTI activist **Mary** – her last name has been omitted for reasons of safety – gays and other members of the LGBTI community don't feel safe in Nijmegen. Mary was invited to Nijmegen for a three-month stay as part of the Shelter City project.

# IN THE NEWS



**Elections** By now it will come as no surprise that the eight seats of the University Student Council are once again to be neatly distributed among the student parties AKKUraatd and asap. In the coming academic year, both parties will once again have four seats each. The internal conflict that preceded the elections (see below) seems to have had no effect on seat distribution. Staff members were also invited to vote this year in the biannual Works Council elections – as this edition goes to press, however, the results of the election are as yet unknown.

**Elections (II)** Apparently, the University Student Council had struggled behind the scenes all year, but a week before the elections all hell finally broke loose: AKKUraatd refused to cooperate further with the other Council members. In an article submitted to voxweb.nl, the Party explained that they considered the Student Council undemocratic. Asap and the umbrella associations begged to differ, and were of the opinion that the current situation, in which the Student Council is able to act as a single body thanks to internal cooperation, worked very well.

**A publishing company of our own** The Open Access Radboud University Press: doesn't it sound cool? The Nijmegen University Library hopes to launch its own publishing company. Scientific publications are very expensive. As it is, either publishing itself is cheap, but the journal subscriptions are exorbitant, or, when subscriptions are free, as in open





On 23 May, a sunny edition of Radboud Rocks drew a big crowd to the podiums on the Erasmusplein and the Pieter Bondamplein. With performances by Sweaty Disco (photo), Fresku, Jody Bernal, Ronnie Ruysdael, and Navarone.

access journals, the publication costs are high. By launching its own publishing company, the University hopes to create a third option: open access publications for an affordable price.

**Homeless students** The members of the T.H.O.R. fraternity are being threatened with eviction from their house on the Bijleveldsingel. The Municipality has refused the permit required for room rental because of complaints from the neighbourhood. People say the students cause too much inconvenience. Since last year, the Nijmegen Municipality has been actively combatting illegally rented student houses, and the owner of the T.H.O.R. building is now paying the price. An appeal has been filed. If it's rejected, the landlord will probably take the case to court, according to his lawyer, Samuel Vermeulen, himself a former member of T.H.O.R. (see also the interview on p. 12).

**Van Rijn Committee** The government should waste no time in redirecting more funds towards universities of technology, at the expense of general universities. This is one of the conclusions of a report presented by the Van Rijn Advisory Committee in May. According to the report, Radboud University should get €10 million less. "There's a big gap between educational capacity and labour market

demand for graduates in science and technology," was how the Committee justified their recommendation. The Nijmegen Executive Board is concerned: "The risk is that by following this report's recommendations we will not only create new bottlenecks, but also exacerbate existing ones."

**Theft** From shopping in Paris to shopping at the discount store. Student tennis association Slow must have felt a bit like ex-millionaire Hans from the Telfort commercials when they discovered their treasury had been emptied of all but 67 cents. According to the Board, the former treasurer is responsible for the theft – he's believed to have stolen no less than € 44,500. The association has reported the theft to the police, who have launched an investigation.

**Misconduct** From sexual intimidation to the stealing of ideas: female university researchers are victims of various kinds of misconduct. This is the conclusion of a study by Nijmegen gender expert Marijke Naezer and Professors Marieke van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop. They plead for a culture change and better support for the victims. Men can also be victim of such abuses, emphasises Naezer, but women tend to be overrepresented in the statistics, which is why the study focused on women only.

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## COLOPHON

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# THE RISING STAR OF SARA ISSAOUN

She's published in the *Astrophysical Journal*, appeared in *The New York Times*, and was involved in the most important astronomical breakthrough in light years: the first photograph ever of a black hole. And PhD student Sara Issaoun is only 25 years old.

**Text:** Mickey Steijaert / **Photography:** Julie de Bruin





**S**ara Issaoun turns her laptop around. The Skype screen shows her office in Boston, Massachusetts. Bare, white walls, standard office furniture: nothing to suggest that this is an office at the Harvard Center for Astrophysics, at the heart of what is perhaps the most prestigious university in the world. Radboud PhD student Issaoun (25) is here for a one-month work visit, not for the first time during her studies. “This building was once part of a Catholic school,” she says. “It’s not a very nice building: it’s quite old, with lots of narrow hallways.”

*The Huygens building is better?*

“Yes, much more beautiful, ha ha.”

*Many researchers dream of working at a university like Harvard. Can you talk a little about what it’s like to actually be there?*

“It’s not that different from home. The facilities and coffee are not that great, actually. The people who work here, they are the ones who make it so special.”

## ‘MY BUILDING IS HOME TO A COUPLE OF NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS’

*You get to meet world-famous astronomers at the coffee corner?*

“Yes. My building is home to a couple of Nobel Prize winners, so there’s always the chance of running into them in the hallway. Authors of the study textbooks I used as a student, authors of famous publications, speakers of famous lectures: they’re all here.”

Whereas for your average scientist, a visit to Harvard represents a major milestone, for Issaoun it’s not that big a deal. Her career has taken off at a dizzying speed. Last January, she was the main author of a much discussed paper on the orientation of the Earth in relation to the black hole at the centre of the Milky Way, Sagittarius A\*. And in April, she made the world news as team member of the Event Horizon Telescope (EHT) consortium, with the first photograph of a black hole.

A week after her visit to Harvard Issaoun joins Vox for an interview in the ‘much more beautiful’ Huygens building. We’d like to know how a 25-year old gets to boast of such impressive academic exploits. How did she so quickly graduate from dreamy child to astronomy super star? From the home she shares with her parents in Arnhem, Issaoun has brought her telescope. A massive device, nearly a metre high, and a present from her father for her twelfth birth-

day. “A gift from Singapore,” she explains. “My father immediately thought of me when he saw it.”

### The telescope

Sara Issaoun was eight years old when she was given an assignment at her primary school in Montreal. To use cardboard to create our solar system, including all the planets and the sun. This school assignment about strange, faraway planets, made a deep impression on her. That same day, Issaoun went to the local library with her mother. They came home with a pile of fifteen children’s books on astronomy, and little Sara devoured the books full of photographs of planets and nebulae. From that time onwards, Issaoun knew she wanted to become an astronomer.

The telescope turned out to be a well-chosen gift. Young Issaoun often took it along to the St-Benoît Park, close to her house. There she spent hours staring at faraway galaxies.

*Is your work as astronomer what you imagined as a child?*

“No, not at all. As a child, I thought astronomers spent their time looking through telescopes and photographing stars. But during my studies, I learnt that astronomers study space using other types of light: radio and infrared rays. These are collected using large dishes that translate the light signals into data. I primarily work with data and computers, not with a telescope.”

*Can you explain exactly what you do with these data?*

“When we make observations with our telescopes, what we’re doing is collecting a huge set of data. For the photograph of the black hole, for example, we used five petabytes of data – comparable to the memory capacity of five thousand laptops. These data consist mostly of static. We then create models to account for all the possible sources of this static, such as disturbances caused by the telescope itself, or the weather circumstances above the telescope. We then delete these data, and what we are left with is the signal we’re looking for.”

*Were you disappointed when you discovered the work was very different from what you imagined as a child?*

“No, never! I never had any doubts. Imagine: we get to study objects and events that are so far away we cannot see them with the naked eye, and we try to understand what they tell us about our world. This is what’s always inspired me.”

*You find it so easy to explain your passion for astronomy. Is this something you thought about a lot?*

Issaoun laughs. “I’ve been asked this so often. Mostly by my parents. They would ask me: How can you be so attached to a subject you chose when you were 8? Despite the fact that they’ve always supported me, they find it strange that I’ve never changed my mind. A lot of people find it strange, by the way. I chose something at age 8, and now that I’m 25, it’s still exactly what I’m doing.”



Sara Issaoun at Harvard near one of the telescopes used on public visitors' days



Live broadcast of the French news channel France24 interviewing Sara Issaoun following the disclosure of the first photograph of a black hole

## 'I CHOSE SOMETHING **AT AGE 8** AND IT'S STILL EXACTLY WHAT I'M DOING NOW'

### The email

Heino Falcke is a busy man. He's a professor, the brain behind EHT, and a figurehead for the Radboud University Astronomy Department. In other words: many people vie for the Professor's attention.

Luckily, this is something Issaoun is blissfully unaware of on the morning of 3 January 2014, in the middle of the Christmas holidays, as she presses 'Send'. "I'll be spending three months in the Netherlands this summer," she wrote in her email to Falcke. "I'd like to spend part of my holidays volunteering on a physics research project."

Issaoun's parents moved to Arnhem for work reasons when she was 14. Issaoun came along, but a few years later she returned to Canada to study. She hoped to put her summer months in the Netherlands to good use. "I basically looked up the email addresses of astronomers in the Netherlands, and asked whether they happened to have a project I could join in," says Issaoun. Sacrificing your summer to do volunteer work may be a normal thing to do in North America, but it's certainly unusual in the Netherlands.

This may have been the reason why Falcke responded so quickly. Exactly eight minutes later, the answer reached Issaoun's mailbox. "Sounds interesting," Falcke wrote. Could she send him her CV?

Issaoun really got lucky. Falcke had just completed the preparatory phase of a large-scale worldwide collaboration project. Its goal - to capture the event horizon of a black hole - was something many believed to be impossible. The black hole they wanted to photograph, M87, was located 53.5 million light years (approximately 500 trillion kilometres) from Earth. Kind of like photographing the width of the eyebrow of a person 40 kilometres away.

But Falcke knew what he was doing, and he could certainly use the help of an enthusiastic student with a solid background in physics. In the summer of 2014, Issaoun began working as a volunteer on EHT, the gigantic project that simultaneously combined images from eight telescopes from Europe to South America and Antarctica to photograph M87. She enjoyed it so much she decided to do a Master's programme and later a PhD in Nijmegen under Falcke's supervision. Issaoun's career as astronomer was launched.

**The photograph**

April 2019. The lights dim in the press room of the European Commission. This is the moment everyone's been waiting for, and which has brought the international press here today. "I didn't believe this black hole was as big as people claimed," says Heino Falcke in the microphone. "Until we saw ... that!" Here it is then. The first photograph of a black hole appears on the screen. The audience bursts into applause.

Sara Issaoun joins in. Together with her team, she leaves the press conference, only to run into a wall of journalists. Requests for live interviews are rolling in steadily. Issaoun 'takes on' the newscast of the international French TV channel France 24 - French is her mother tongue. On Twitter #EHTblackhole is fast turning into a worldwide 'trending topic'. In total, an estimated 4.5 billion people took the time to look at the photograph of the black hole in the media.

*Did you expect this kind of response?*

"We expected some people to be interested: the scientific community, amateur astronomers. But we didn't expect it to be so big among the general public."

# 'THE CONCEPT OF A BLACK HOLE IS SO INSANE'

*Can you explain it?*

"The photograph is a tangible result. There are lots of figures and graphs leading up to this kind of photograph, but the image itself makes people think and dream. It makes our research visually accessible. Plus, there is this very strong idea of a black hole as the end of the world. Heino always calls it the 'gate to hell'. It reminds people of finiteness, mortality, extreme circumstances. The concept of a black hole is so insane. And now we're looking at its edges. It's quite a bizarre idea."

The unveiling of the photograph gave Issaoun her greatest podium so far: an interview in *The New York Times*. But the events leading up to that article were not particularly pleasant.

In the wake of the Brussels press conference, a photograph spread on social media of Katie Bouman, com-

## SUMMER TIP BY SARA ISSAOUN

**"Montreal has lots of summer festivals: the 'Just For Laughs' comedy festival, the International Jazz Festival, and the Osheaga music festival. There's also a cool graffiti festival, 'Mural'.**

**As far as food is concerned, you've got to try the local specialty: poutine, a mix of French fries, gravy and cheese. And of course the well-known Montreal bagels. Did you know that the world-famous Fairmount bagel bakery is owned by an aunt of NASA astronaut Greg Chamitoff? In 2008, he brought a bag of Montreal bagels along on his trip to the ISS international space station."**



puter scientist at the California Institute of Technology and member of the EHT team. Why didn't Bouman's name appear in the media, since she played such an important role in the project? the Twitter community wondered. The project leaders, all males, were accused of taking credit for Bouman's work.

Issaoun's cheerful tone turns serious as she talks about Bouman. "It caused us some serious damage."

*Why?*

"After the unveiling of the photograph, we were planning to go public as a large-scale collaboration project. EHT brings together more than two hundred researchers, from eighteen countries. We wanted to emphasise the collaborative nature of our project. But we didn't anticipate Katie's personal story spreading through the media ahead of our efforts. It got to the point where the media were only interested in talking to Katie. All project members, also the younger ones, had been promised some media attention. Now all attention was focused on one person."

*So how did you end up in *The New York Times*?*

"The online reactions were slowly becoming more aggressive. It was all about anti-feminism, sexism, Katie's scientific work being stolen. The older, male leaders of the project did not feel in a position to respond. As a young woman, I didn't expect the media to react so negatively to me. So, when *The New York Times* called for a response to a nuanced article, I felt it was the right time to speak up."

*Didn't it feel strange in this context to be interviewed about your own personal contribution?*

"Many of us were interviewed about our contribution. It's important to hear the individual stories, but we should also keep in mind the facts. My contribution is a very small part of the larger story."

Back to Boston, 2019. Issaoun's days as a PhD student are mostly filled with meetings, often with colleagues from all over the world. Spending a month in person with her American colleagues has made it possible to quickly take steps towards developing a new joint project.

*Why the hurry? Aren't you in need of a holiday after such a world first?*

"For the last four or five months, we've been very busy writing up publications surrounding the photograph. We're all fed up with it by now. There are still so many other data available from our observation rounds, and everyone is keen to get to work on them. This is the



most exciting time: trying things out, seeing how the data behave, and what we can learn from it.”

*Do you have a goal? A scientific discovery to crown your career?*

“I think the photograph of the black hole was such a discovery. The next big step is to make a film. Sagittarius A\*, the black hole at the heart of the Milky Way, moves much faster in our night sky than M87. Photographing ‘Sgr A\*’ is a bit like photographing a running toddler: turbulent and blurred. So we have to develop techniques that will allow us to film it.”

*Doesn't it feel as if you've already achieved your life's ambition?*

“I sometimes get this question from older colleagues for whom the photograph represented their life’s work. Am I not afraid of having peaked too early?” Issaoun falls silent for a moment. “Well, I’ve thought about it. EHT would never have been able to take this photograph ten

‘WE CAN NOW OBSERVE PHENOMENA THAT WERE **UNKNOWN** ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO’

years ago, with the equipment they had at the time. So who knows what kind of experiments will become possible in ten years’ time? There are so many ideas around just waiting for technology to catch up with them. We can now observe phenomena that were unknown one hundred years ago. Who knows where we will be in ten or twenty years?” She laughs again.

“I try not to think too much about the fact that this project was probably the best thing I’ll ever do.” ✪



# 'I'VE HAD A TASTE OF FREEDOM'

Samuel Vermeulen, lawyer by profession, grew up in a commune. As a student he joined the Nijmegen fraternity T.H.O.R. It's not that different, he says. 'Eating together, going on holidays together.' He wrote a book about his turbulent youth and Nijmegen student days.

**Text:** Annemarie Haverkamp / **Photography:** Erik van 't Hullenaar



Samuel Vermeulen at his  
old student house in Nijmegen



# SAMUEL VERMEULEN

**In lawyer Samuel Vermeulen's (33) earliest memory he's four years old, sitting on his father's shoulders and watching Bhagwan's body being carried on a bier through the crowd.** The Indian guru Bhagwan (later known as Osho) lies under a blanket of roses, a pearl-embroidered cap on his head. His body is placed on the funeral pyre with clothes and all. People are dancing, in white robes. There's singing and weeping.

Vermeulen was born in a commune in Beuningen, near Nijmegen. Every year, his parents spent the winter in Poona, India. With other Bhagwan followers they formed a mini-society (ashram) in which free love and meditation were key ingredients. They lived, worked and cooked together.

Back in the Netherlands, his parents lived separately in various communes. His father had studied Medicine and worked as a GP. Vermeulen lived with his mother, but after Bhagwan's death she developed a psychosis and was committed to a psychiatric hospital. The young boy moved to Amsterdam with his father, who unfortunately only had attention for himself and his new girlfriend, an alcohol and heroin addict and ex-prostitute. During a trip to Hungary, the couple is arrested for drug trafficking. Little Samuel, a passenger in the car, finds temporary refuge at his grand-mother's house in Valkenswaard. His father is imprisoned, and shortly afterwards Vermeulen's uncle and aunt in Enschede volunteer as foster parents. They get a six-year old with rotting baby teeth, too small shoes, and a severe separation trauma. "My parents

should never have had children," Vermeulen shares in a recent interview in the *Algemeen Dagblad*.

Bored and recalcitrant, Vermeulen gives his foster parents a hard time, but he has no trouble passing his pre-university (VWO) exams. He moves to Nijmegen to study Law and Business Administration. In Nijmegen he joins the T.H.O.R. fraternity. You'd think the contrast couldn't be greater. Bhagwan versus student fraternity. He laughs. "I had no idea what a fraternity was, you know."

## Prince

Today, on a rainy Thursday in May, we stand in front of his former student house on the Bijleveldsingel. Samuel Vermeulen moved to Amsterdam years ago, and he's used to giving interviews by now. Last year, he published an autobiography about his bizarre childhood. The title refers to the name he was given by Bhagwan himself: Swami Prem, which means Prince of Love. The book, which also features his Nijmegen student days, marks the final stage in an intensive therapeutic process that took him three years to complete. The successful lawyer turned out to be more hurt than he knew.

But to get back to that fraternity. How did he end up there? "Very simple," he says. "I responded to an ad for a room on Kamernet.nl. It was only on the evening of the interview that they told me the new tenant would have to join their fraternity. I'd never even heard of the word. They said they did a lot of activities together. It sounded like fun to me."

Vermeulen locks his OV bicycle. A student opens the door. "Hi Samuel. Fancy a beer?" It's 3 pm. No, thanks.

The prison marriage of father Jaap and his girlfriend Tina, 1992



Samuel with his mother at the gates of the ashram, 1987



School photograph with rotten teeth, 1991



Graduation ceremony Cambridge, 2010





'FOR THE FIRST  
TIME IN MY LIFE,  
I'M **HAPPY** WITH  
WHO I AM'





PHOTO: HARRY VANRAAI/HOLLANDESE HOOGTE

Samuel in India, 2018

With quick steps he climbs the stairs of his former home. Sports socks in the hallway, fraternity ties on the doors. Not much has changed. Samuel explains he soon felt at home at T.H.O.R. "In a way, there's not that much difference between a commune and a fraternity. Both involve a group of individuals who have a common denominator and use it as a basis to create a community. Exercising together, eating together, and going on holidays together. It all felt very familiar to me." He's just returned from a week of cycling in Italy with eight friends, half of them fellow fraternity members.

The portrait gallery in the hallway still includes a black-and-white portrait of Samuel. "I think it was taken in my first year. I'm guessing this from looking at my hair, I'd started to let it grow." When he lived with his foster parents, he wore his hair short. They were strict with him. A good thing too, he reflects out loud,

or he would have completely gone off the tracks.

The Samuel Vermeulen standing here today is completely different from the one who studied in Nijmegen 15 years ago, he says. Law turned out to fit him like a glove. He was a man of logic and reason. And yes, it was also an allergic response to his parents' dramatical head-in-the-clouds attitude. Bhagwan followers spent much of their time cuddling and meditating. "I thought feelings and spirituality were complete nonsense," he says. For a long time, he kept up the illusion that he could manage fine without.

As he opens the bathroom door (hair in the shower drain), he shares that in his days the fraternity house was nominated by Vox as dirtiest student house in Nijmegen. "Ha ha, we even won a free cleaning spree as a result. It was cleaned very thoroughly and professionally."

His book also contains more thrilling details about his student life. How he and a fellow fraternity member stole

a van to drive back to Nijmegen from a party in Mill. The keys had been left in the dashboard, and the two planned to park the car on the corner of the fraternity house and make an anonymous report to the police. Their plan failed. On St. Annastraat, the two students were intercepted by police officers, who dragged them out of the car at gunpoint and arrested them. Vermeulen was sentenced to community service.

"I had to do two and a half days of hoeing on an industrial site." He grins. He'd never held a hoe in his life. But come on, don't forget these were first-year students! Then, more seriously: "I did learn from it, it was the last time I did anything like that. Fraternities kind of suggest to their members that they can get away with

## 'I THOUGHT FEELINGS AND SPIRITUALITY WERE NONSENSE'

anything. They have an attitude of 'we're untouchable because we're students'. Those hours of community work certainly taught me otherwise."

In *Prins van Liefde* (Prince of Love), he describes how he worked as a night porter at Hotel Belvoir, drinking expensive whisky with his fraternity buddies all night. He talks about the phone jokes he played, scaring his unsuspecting victims to death ("Hello Mrs So-and-So, I'd like to inform you that your house is due to be sold by way of execution").

He thought of himself as uninhibited. When his father died in 2014, Vermeulen found a box of his diaries, and discovered that restlessness ran in the family.

"I was shocked. I began to read and saw a copy of myself. My father was also intelligent and successful until his thirties. It was only later that he lost his way."

Vermeulen read about how lonely his father felt, how he'd been neglected as a child, and craved love as a result. It was like reading his own story. After his father was released from prison, he got lost in heroin – he even once asked eight-year old Samuel to hold the lighter under the piece of aluminium foil with the words "now you know how to Chase the Dragon!". Alcohol and psychoses further destroyed his life. Vermeulen was thirty and looked at himself in the mirror. From the outside, he looked brilliant, but how frayed was he on the inside?

### Robot

In the second year of his studies, Vermeulen launched a call centre in Nijmegen together with a friend. He was bored in his studies and was looking for something new.

## SUMMER TIP BY SAMUEL VERMEULEN

**"Landjuweel (8-11 August). The yearly festival at Ruigoord, an artist colony just outside Amsterdam. Four days of music, theatre, spirituality, art, and dance. A nice change from your run-of-the-mill music festival. Staunch hippies and families with children all dancing together.'**



They hired approximately thirty students, and made lots of money. Vermeulen wore tailored suits worth € 1500 apiece. Success became his drive, he was sensitive to applause ("which I confused with love"). When he genuinely became hungry for academic knowledge, he sold his shares and started studying in earnest. "I took advantage of pretty much every opportunity the University offered," he explains. United Netherlands, the Honours Programme, and an additional Master's programme in History. Samuel developed a kind of performance addiction. He wanted to be the best in everything. After completing his Law degree with a *cum laude* distinction, he went on to study at the prestigious Cambridge University. He then followed internships at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Yugoslavia Tribunal, before finally ending up at the Amsterdam Zuidas. He was offered a job at the biggest law firm in the Netherlands: De Brauw, Blackstone and Westbroek. Workweeks of seventy hours were the norm, swallowing a pill on weekends was just part of Amsterdam life. "I was a robot."

When his father died and Vermeulen read his memoirs, all his childhood memories rushed back to the surface. He felt shaky, and went into therapy. "Together with my psychologist I decided to write a book. I had all my father's diaries and letters typed out, and I took a sabbatical from the law firm."

### India

In 2017, Vermeulen decided to return to Poona, India. What were his parents looking for there? What had their life in the ashram been like? Upon arrival he was asked to change into a red robe, which felt strange. He was there for an Osho course. "I thought it would be something with a PowerPoint presentation. On the morning of the first day, I walked into the room: just an empty space with cushions on the floor. I asked the course facilitator 'What shall I do?' He put on some music and said 'just start dancing'. I looked at him. 'It's 9 am, dude, I'm totally sober. What kind of crazy idea is that?'"

But he did end up dancing, as unobtrusively as possible, in a corner. The course facilitator took his hands and put them into those of an unknown woman, in whose eyes he was asked to keep looking. He danced with her, feeling clumsy and uneasy. But it was good, he could feel it, even though he didn't really know why. Back at the commune, the first tears came. Samuel the Robot slowly fell apart.

He went back to India for a Tantra course. Gave himself over to the spirituality he had always found so ridiculous. "The sannyasins (Bhagwan followers, AH) my parents spent time with in the Netherlands were all unemployed and hardly able to meet their own needs. I thought all spiritual people were like that. It turned out to be totally wrong. In the ashram I met successful psychologists, architects, and lawyers. They all had their lives in order."

And now? These days, Samuel Vermeulen feels better than ever. Thanks to therapy, thanks to his book, thanks





## COUNSELLOR IN THE T.H.O.R. CASE

Samuel Vermeulen currently acts as counsellor in the impending eviction of the current tenants of the fraternity house. The Municipality of Nijmegen has refused to legalise the permit for room rental at the Bijleveldsingel 80. According to municipal officers, T.H.O.R.'s landlord doesn't have his papers in order, and a student house is undesirable at this location because of inconvenience to the neighbours. Vermeulen is challenging this, arguing that the permit should have been granted, and is technically speaking not even necessary. The case was heard on 4 June. The judge will rule on 5 July. If the appeal fails, the landlord still has the option of bringing the case to court. If he loses, the students will have to leave the fraternity house.

to India. He's lost his longing for success. "For the first time in my life, I'm happy with who I am. I can be alone without feeling like the walls are closing in on me. I used to feel no empathy, I know that now. I needed people to fill a hole in me, which meant I could never give them my full attention. The beauty of people and things escaped me."

Once his book was published, he quit his job at De Brauw. He no longer wanted to work on million euros cases for multinationals, with all contact taking place via email. He launched his own company. "As a lawyer I now only take on small cases that I enjoy, for a few days a week." This summer the former fraternity member is legally representing T.H.O.R. The current tenants of the fraternity house are at risk of being evicted by the Municipality, and he's trying to forestall eviction on behalf of the house owner (see box).

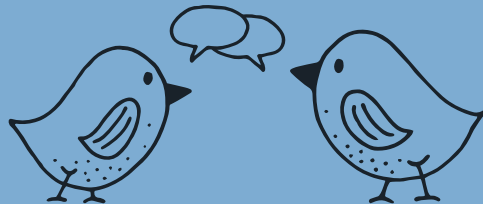
In Amsterdam, he's also active as a real estate developer. In his free time, he plays tennis, cycles, goes to the theatre, and meditates. He's not planning to return to his old life. "I've had a taste of freedom. My life is so much broader and richer now." Self-development has become a key pillar

## 'I DON'T IDEALISE FRATERNITY LIFE'

of his existence, as was the case for his parents. Does he still blame them? "I still find it difficult to be angry at them." They were looking for something they never found.

His mother is still in a psychiatric hospital. Having completed the tour of his former student house, Vermeulen closes the door. He's grateful to the fraternity for the friends he met there, some of them friends for life. His years in Nijmegen formed him. "But," he says, "I don't idealise fraternity life, as I see some former colleagues do." And he still has problems with rough hazing practices – "senior students who suddenly start shouting at you". \*

| **biography** | **Samuel Vermeulen** | **born in** | Nijmegen, 1985 | **studies** | Bachelor's in Law, Master's in Politics and Parliament (Nijmegen), Master's in International Law (Cambridge)



**NIJMEGEN VERSUS LEIDEN:**

# SHOULD A RECTOR TWEET OR NOT?

At first glance, Rectors Carel Stolker (Leiden) and Han van Krieken (Nijmegen) don't seem to have much in common. Stolker sees himself as a champion of free speech, and is not afraid of making his opinions known. His Nijmegen colleague Van Krieken seems more cautious. What are their motives? And where do they find each other? A double interview.

Text: Ken Lambeets and Mathijs Noij / Photography: Bert Beelen

**In the Utrecht University Hall, in the shadow of the Dom, Carel Stolker and Han van Krieken have just come out of a three-and-a-half-hour Conference of Rectors.**

Four times a year, Dutch university Rectors meet to talk – this evening for example about the position of external PhD candidates. Throughout the year, they keep each other up to date through a joint WhatsApp group.

Carel Stolker (1954), Rector of Leiden University, is a ‘Catholic boy’, who’s never tried to hide his membership of the Christian Democratic Appeal Party (CDA). A Professor of Private Law, he’s known as a champion of freedom of opinion. He’s also claimed this freedom for himself: on Twitter, he sometimes reacts faster than his own shadow, even when it comes to tricky topics, such as the pronouncements of former Leiden PhD student Thierry Baudet about the supposedly undermining role of universities in our society.

That other well-known figurehead of the Forum voor Democratie, Dutch Senate Member Paul Cliteur, is a Professor at Leiden University. When some of the University of Groningen staff felt he should not be allowed to speak at their institution, Stolker tweeted: “Freedom of speech is the most important pillar of academia.”

The two years younger Nijmegen Rector Han van Krieken (1956) is no stranger to Leiden University. “It’s my Alma Mater. I studied Medicine there.”

And yet, in many ways Van Krieken seems to be Stolker’s antipole. The pathologist keeps his political opinions to himself, and stays as far as possible away from social media. “When you shout too loud, all you get is resistance,” he once told *Vox*. The Nijmegen Executive Board only responded to Thierry Baudet’s pronouncements after being urged to do so by twelve Nijmegen researchers.

As Rectors, Stolker and Van Krieken are sometimes expected to get involved in the public debate. Because current events force them to, or because they feel called to do so by their researchers.

At the same time, Rectors are also responsible for ensuring that the debate at their own university doesn’t get out of hand. Who gets a podium at the university, and who doesn’t?

*Vox: Mr Stolker, you once told Elsevier that Viktor Orbán is in principle welcome to come and speak at your university.*

Carel Stolker (CS): “Not even in principle. Let’s face it: he’s the leader of an EU country; Prime Minister Mark Rutte also talks to him. I completely disagree with what he stands for, and I think what he’s doing with universities is profoundly wrong (the Central European University in Budapest had to shut down for political reasons, Eds.)”

Han van Krieken (HvK): “I don’t have to think twice about Orbán either. He’s certainly welcome. For me, a line is crossed when people call for violence. Take the American preacher who believes murdering homosexuals is a good thing (Steven Anderson, Eds.). Luckily the Dutch government has forbidden him to come to the Netherlands.”

## ‘WHO GETS A PODIUM AT UNIVERSITY, AND WHO DOESN’T?’

CS: “In Leiden, everyone’s welcome on three conditions. First of all, there has to be room for an open debate with serious questions being asked – we don’t do ‘speaker’s corner’, with speakers who only promote their own views without engaging in a debate. Secondly, the opinions expressed must not be in contravention of the law. A person who says homosexuals should burn at the stake is therefore not welcome. Thirdly, physical safety must be guaranteed at all times. This is something we’re always able to do, actually, by hiring enough strong men and women.”

*Vox: The Nijmegen Executive Board (this was before your time, Mr Van Krieken) urgently cautioned the Honours Students Association against inviting Diederik Stapel to speak. Mr Stolker, would you have done the same?*

CS: “No. I find it fascinating how a person like Stapel thinks. But as a Rector, I would have

wanted to know the context for the invitation. Was it an interview? Students are great in this respect: they’re very open and find it easy to ask questions. I wouldn’t have forbidden it, but I would have insisted that the debate should be of high quality.”

*Vox: What about you, Mr Van Krieken?*

HvK: “It’s a tough one. I asked Gerard Meijer (the then President of the Executive Board in Nijmegen, Eds.) why he had approached the Honours students. He said one of the reasons was that Stapel would have been offered a podium without a serious debate leader. Meijer told the students: think very carefully about whether you want to give this man a podium, but he didn’t forbid it. I would probably have done the same. Incidentally, De Vrije Student had invited Stapel to the Campus on the very same night, so he ended up coming anyway.”

CS: “Whatever you do, as a Rector, you’re bound to get things wrong at times. Of course we should be careful not to let the university become a channel for certain political groups, but I would mind much more if an administrator took it upon himself to decide who’s welcome. This would cause much more damage than having someone like Jordan Peterson (a Canadian Psychologist who fights against political equality, identity politics, and gender expression, among other things, Eds.) come and speak at your university.”

HvK: “Recently, Paul Cliteur was supposed to speak at the University of Groningen, but staff members thought he wasn’t welcome. I was happy that Rector Elmer Sterken said: there’s no way we’re going to exclude him from our university.”

CS: “Paul Cliteur teaches at our university every day, ha ha!”

HvK: “I was really surprised that Groningen researchers would make such pronouncements. This kind of thing could happen in Nijmegen too, but I would certainly not let the commotion result in the invitation being cancelled.

A while ago, Climate Scientist Heleen de Coninck invited the Sustainability Director of Shell for a lecture. Students were planning to interrupt the lecture by bringing in a gigantic inflatable pipeline. Heleen said: make your statement, then take that thing outside, and come back to engage in a dialogue. I think that’s a good approach.”

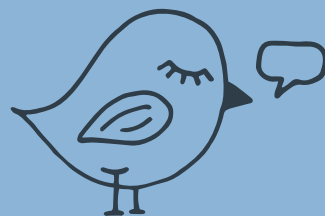
CS: “Of course. The only function of this





HAN VAN KRIEKEN:

# 'I DIDN'T FEEL THE NEED TO REACT TO THIERRY BAUDET'



kind of action is to get a photograph. Also, in my experience, it's usually lecturers who want to forbid some speakers from coming, rather than students."

HvK: "In a YouTube video, one of our political philosophers (Mathijs van de Sande, Eds.) explains at an anti-racism demonstration in the city where freedom of opinion comes from. It was originally intended to strengthen the weaker groups in society. According to Van de Sande, this means this freedom is not to be granted to everyone, so for instance not to Geert Wilders or the Forum voor Democratie. I find that a tricky stance."

CS: "That's because it's a profoundly wrong stance."

*Vox: Another case study: What did you think about Roos Vonk comparing factory farming to the Holocaust?*

HvK: "In a column in Het Parool Frits Barend asked what we as Radboud University administrators thought of it. I called him and expressed my disapproval of the comparison, which is also what I did in my subsequent conversation with Vonk. It's not so much that we called her to account for it; nor did we warn or reprimand her. I'm not going to forbid Professors to do something that I think will give them a hard time with the media."

*Vox: What would you have done, Mr Stolker?*

CS: "I vaguely remember the incident. I find it an extremely tasteless comparison, but Vonk is allowed to make it – as a statement it's not against the law."

*Vox: Should the university be an intellectually safe ground, where everyone feels safe to publicly express their opinion?*

CS: "This is a debate at the moment in the US: should you protect your students and staff against non-mainstream opinions? In Leiden, we think not. After all, this is the world they'll soon be part of. Engage in the debate, or stay away. I'm against the university as a safe space, an academic cuddly wall to huddle close to, safe from the terrible sounds coming from the world outside."

HvK: "A term that's often mentioned with respect to safe spaces is microaggression: people saying things that may unconsciously come across as aggressive. Now, some people believe we should address this kind of microaggression and decolonise our curriculum. It's hard to really get the conversation going on this topic. For example, I'm in favour of replacing the word 'slave' in our lectures with 'enslaved', but then also explaining why this is important. At our Faculty of Arts, lecture hall doors

sometimes sport trigger warnings if a lecture includes a topic that may be sensitive, such as the Holocaust. I seriously wonder whether this is a good idea.”

CS: “I haven’t seen such warnings in Leiden yet. A Law Professor who returned to the Netherlands after a few years in the US once told me that at some US law schools, people are debating whether it’s still OK to teach about rape in the curriculum, since there may be students in the room who have been raped. A terrible experience, of course, but what’s the alternative? Pretend that rapes don’t happen? Are you allowed to be ‘against’ Europe in a lecture on European law? To what extent can you openly express your opinion about climate denial? These can be very sensitive and complex questions, which I believe we should address in our Basic Teaching Qualification (BKO): how do you teach about politically sensitive and sometimes painful topics in an academic context? It requires a lot of skilfulness on the part of the lecturer.”

*Vox: Should Rectors respond to Thierry Baudet’s pronouncement that we are being undermined by our universities?*

HvK: “The Minister of Education responded to it very appropriately. I didn’t feel the need to join the discussion, but when a group of Nijmegen researchers called for a response in *Vox*, as Members of the Executive Board, we felt we had to take a stance.

So many politicians make pronouncements about topics related to the university. I don’t feel that it’s particularly the Rector’s role to respond to every single one. As far as I’m concerned, we could have left it to the public debate.”

*Vox: You beg to differ, Mr Stolker?*

CS: “I actually do believe it to be the Rector’s job. If a public person claims we are an undermining institution without providing arguments to support this, I’ll immediately take stance against it. After all, this touches on the core values of the university.”

HvK: “But do you do so as Rector, or as an individual?”

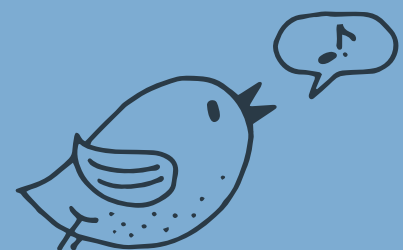
CS: “As a Rector: it’s my job to represent the academic community and its values. I’m not going to shout, but I will speak. Which is why after that pronouncement by Baudet, I really wanted to talk to Paul Cliteur. He’s now a Senate Member for Forum voor Democratie, and a member of my university, and I wanted to know what his Party meant with this pronouncement.

Universities play such an important role in society. When someone undermines this kind of institution without proof, they touch on the



CAREL STOLKER:

‘ENGAGE IN  
THE DEBATE,  
OR STAY AWAY’



very foundations of a centuries' old institution and its crucial significance for our society. I'm not against criticism aimed at the university, but I thought the way Baudet did it was highly inappropriate. Look, in her new book, NRC columnist Rosanne Hertzberger says a lot of our research is worthless. That's also an undermining statement in a way, but at least she provides arguments for it."

HvK: "But if you keep responding to such statements, aren't you making them bigger than they are?"

CS: "Saying nothing is much worse, Han. It's not for nothing that we Rectors are figureheads. It's our job to meet that first wave head on."

HvK: "Isn't it obvious that I'll say the universities don't undermine our society? Other people say much wiser things, and they don't get this kind of attention. I find it a pity."

*Vox: Mr Stolker, you're very active on Twitter. Have you ever thought about doing the same, Mr Van Krieken?*

HvK: "Our spokesman keeps advising me to do so, but it's not my medium. I think it will cost me a lot of time, and I don't feel the need for it at all. The short messages on Twitter can easily lead to superficial and simplistic responses. That's why I much prefer to engage in public debate via my columns. These usually get positive responses."

CS: "Some time ago, I unexpectedly ended up in a conversation on Twitter with Mr Eelco Runia (former Associate Professor at the University of Groningen, Eds.) about his latest book, in which he argues against market thinking when it comes to universities. We hold very different opinions on the subject, but it was an interesting discussion. You have to steer clear of the gutter, but Twitter is a fun medium for staying on top of the debate. Of course you have to be careful, since one wrong tweet could mean the end of your career as a Rector. And if you do it for the students, don't bother: they're not on Twitter."

HvK: "Our students are all on Jodel (an app that allows anonymous users to post messages that can only be seen by other users within a radius of ten kilometres, Eds.)."

CS: "Jodel?"

HvK: "It's popular among Nijmegen students. Not so much in other university cities, I've noticed."

## SUMMER TIP BY CAREL STOLKER

**"The Pieterswijk, with at its heart the stunning Pieterskerk, shows off Leiden at its most charming. From there, you can stroll down to the 12th century Burcht van Leiden for a magical view of the old city. Leiden is also full of canals and terraces. And don't forget the Rapenburg, where our University first saw the light of day in 1575. If it's raining, you can dive into one of Leiden's four national museums: Rijksmuseum Boerhaave (History of Science), Naturalis (Biodiversity), the National Museum of Antiquities, and the National Museum of Ethnology."**

## HAN VAN KRIEKEN

**"If the summer is hot, make your way to Museum Valkhof during the hottest hours of the day, and let yourself be locked in the educational escape room: you'll experience what it's like to put your life at risk as a student, having to choose between going into hiding and joining the Resistance. Talk of stress. If it rains, you can extend your visit and take in the Valkhof's beautiful collection and exhibition."**



*Vox: If you get a call from Jeroen Pauw, will you jump on the train to Hilversum?*

HvK: "As a Rector, I've been invited to a couple of preliminary talks for national TV shows, but in the end they didn't want me in the studio – probably because I'm too nuanced (he laughs). The last time was quite recently, for an item on Anglicisation at Nieuwsuur. 'Very interesting,' the editor said, 'but we'll go with someone else.' I did do a one hour interview for the VPRO radio programme Argos recently."

CS: "That programme gives you time to explain yourself. I don't think I'd go to a talk show like Pauw's. Recently, Rianne Letschert (Rector of Maastricht University, Eds.) was invited by M for an interview on sexual intimidation. They invited her for a different topic, and then out of the blue they produced a tweet about rape she'd never seen. She felt awful, but she did a really good job."

*Vox: Mr Stolker, you've sometimes said about other Rectors that they're too much locked in their role as administrators. What did you mean by that?*

HvK: "I can leave the room if you want (he laughs)."

CS: "Actually, I was speaking for myself too. When the Stapel affair was drawing so much attention, I had just recently been appointed Rector. Our reaction frustrated me. We didn't get any further than 'how lucky it didn't happen at our university.' And when Professors were getting fired in Turkey because of their political opinions, we were also very quiet at first."

HvK: "In Brazil they're now closing down universities too; this is something we should definitely speak up against. When I was appointed Rector, I gave a speech at the Opening of the Academic Year on the importance of science, and how this notion clashes with the idea that researchers are only 'putting forward an opinion.' I like to make my opinions known at these kinds of ceremonial moments."

CS: "Rector is Latin for 'regulator', which is an important part of our work, but I also think it's our job to act as figureheads for the university. People expect us to take a stance on important issues, especially where our own university is concerned. You'll never see me tell people who to vote for, but I will meddle in any issues that threaten the core values of the university." \*



# HOW TO MAKE A NEW START

Lilas Fahham (29) never thought she'd come to Europe as a refugee. She now lives in a small apartment in Groningen, and works at the Nijmegen Campus. She investigates the relationship between mental health and labour market participation among Syrians in the Netherlands.

**Text:** Martine Zuidweg / **Photography:** Erik van 't Hullenaar





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Her mother in Aleppo now also knows the Dutch words 'gemeente' (municipality) and 'belastingkantoor' (tax office).

They call each other every day on WhatsApp, sometimes twice a day, if the Internet in Syria allows it. When Lilas Fahham talks about her work, she mixes Arabic and Dutch words. "My mother and I are very close. She always knows what I'm doing and how I feel."

The last time they saw each other in person was in the summer of 2015, in Turkey. Fahham travelled from the Netherlands, her mother from Aleppo, where she works as a paediatrician. "Of course I'd love her to be here with me. But it's not that easy for her to leave. The worst of the war is over now, she and my stepdad still have their house, and they're used to a new way of life." Fahham pauses for a moment, then adds: "It would also be harder for them to get a residence permit here."

Lilas Fahham talks fast. Her fingers click on the table in one of the glass rooms in the Elinor Ostrom building. Her long black hair is loose. She alternates between Dutch and English. After all, English is the language of academia. And it's familiar to her. She grew up in West England, where her parents both took further specialisations in Medicine. She was six when the family returned to Syria.

As a teenager, and later a student, she never for a moment imagined she would one day have to apply for asylum somewhere. "You live your life, you do your best, you study. Then one day, war breaks out in your country. No one expected it. I never imagined I'd come to Europe in such circumstances. As a student perhaps, or a tourist, but not as a refugee."

She knows now that life can capsize from one moment to the next like a sailing boat in a strong gust of wind. But it took her a long time to accept that there was no going back. War in Syria? Just wait a little, tomorrow it will be over. Or else the day after.

She was working on her Master's programme in Jordan when the war broke out. She had completed a Bachelor's on Nutrition at the University of Kalamoon, in South West Syria. "I was lucky not to be in the country and to have something to do. I thought: by the time I complete my Master's programme in two years, it will be over for sure." She lived for a while in Lebanon, where her father had fled with her step-mother. Then the refugee flow began to move. Fahham let herself be carried by it: "I just came along."

#### Waste

In December 2014 she arrived at the asylum centre in Delfzijl. Amazed about how neat and tidy everything was. "I saw how clean the roads were, I saw people throwing their trash into the bin, and even separating waste. It made me so happy: paper here, plastic here, residual waste there. I loved that! In Syria, you just throw everything on one heap, if you bother to throw waste into a bin at all, and not just on the street. Drivers sometimes throw thrash out of the window; you don't get fined



'WHEN THE  
WAR BEGAN,  
WE THOUGHT:  
WHEN THIS IS  
OVER, WE'LL  
GO BACK TO  
**OUR LIVES**'



for it anyway. I've always found it so annoying!"

Few Syrians have managed to get paid work in the Netherlands so far: only 12%, according to recent data from the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. Most Syrians experience psychological problems: they're nervous, depressed, and sad.

As of 1 March, Fahham works for the Nijmegen School of Management, where she investigates the relationship between mental health and labour market participation among Syrians in the Netherlands. She interviews experts on how to best help this group overcome the obstacles they face. Her knowledge of the language and culture will come in useful. "I can offer an insider's perspective. For example, in our culture it's not done to talk about your feelings, especially to people outside your family."

She wants to continue to work in academia. Especially if her research serves a clear social purpose. And it doesn't have to focus exclusively on Syrian migrants. "I'm really interested in studying new migration groups. How do they cope with their new environment? How do they fare in terms of health and social participation? The world is getting smaller. It used to take people years to travel from one place to another. Now you take a plane, and you're at the other end of the world in eight hours."

And then, one day, there you are, at the other end of the world. You need time to accept the facts, she now knows. "When the war began, many of us stopped what we were doing. We thought: when this is over, we'll go back to our lives." In the meantime she followed a Master's programme on Population Studies at the University of Groningen. "I was only half alive. I didn't go out, I spent all my time studying. I was constantly postponing things. Once I complete my Master's, I thought, my new life will begin. Until I finally understood that it made no sense to wait. I had to get on with my life. I'd already lived in the Netherlands for two years by then."

### Cows

She lives with her cats, Sami and Marley, in a small apartment in Groningen. Her brother moved to Sweden, but her father lives close by. He ended up in Hoogeveen, with his wife and their daughter. "I visit them on a regular basis for a good Syrian meal. He picks me up from the train and he and my step-mother cook for me. It's lovely!"

On her way back to Groningen, she enjoys the view from the train. "I love all the green and the fact that it's so flat. You can really see the horizon." And all those little farms with the funny cows. "In Syria, we call them 'spoiled cows'. We have a special kind of butter, which is advertised under the slogan 'This butter comes from Dutch cows', and the advertisement shows cows lazing

about in the grass or playing in the meadows. So when I first came here I wanted to see those cows with my own eyes." She laughs: "And it really is like that!"

Don't you find it a beautiful word, she asks as she crosses the halls of the Elinor Ostrom building. "Rus-tig" (calm). She repeats it one more time. "In Arabic or English, it's just a word, but in Dutch you can feel the calm in the word." A word that has special meaning for her, as her early days in the Netherlands were far from calm. "I was constantly stressed. I felt like I had to do everything perfectly. I still remember standing at the cash register in the supermarket. I'd paid, but I still had to pack up my groceries. I was hurrying, because I didn't want the people behind me to have to wait. But the clients in the queue looked at me with an expression that seemed to say 'take your time'. And the cashier said: 'Relax, it's OK.'"

Maybe it's because she's a refugee or a foreigner that she feels the need to prove herself so much. But she's also had to shake off the Syrian norm that says you should never inconvenience anybody. "It's an additional stress factor, also for me. You're always afraid of stepping on someone's toes. It was only in the Netherlands that I learned to let it go." She thinks for a moment, then adds: "I became more relaxed in the Netherlands."

Building a new life and going along with the mainstream also means finding a job. Which is not easy when nobody knows what your diploma and work experience are worth. For Syrians, looking for a job in the Netherlands is nothing like looking for a job in their country of origin, explains Fahham. "In Syria, they know the language, they understand how the labour market works, they know people, and they have the diplomas everyone works with."

You have to work hard for it, as she knows from experience. "Networking, talking to people, showing them what you've got to offer." The foundation for Refugee Students (UAF) advised her to attend a Career Event. There she met people who brought her into contact with the GGD Groningen (Municipal Health Authority), who created a traineeship position for her. She worked for them for six months as a junior researcher in Epidemiology. Via her new network she found out about the 'Refugees in academia' pilot. She now has a one-year contract at the Nijmegen School of Management. She's happy about it, and hopes it will lead to a PhD position.

She scrolls to a photograph of Sami and Marley, two black and white patches on the sofa. She's always had cats. When she left for Jordan to study, she found a nice lady who agreed to take care of her cat. She never saw the little animal again. She doesn't dare to ask. How can she ask about her cat when this woman's children may no longer be alive? \*

## SUMMER TIP BY LILAS FAHAM

"The Noorderplantsoen in Groningen is a great place to celebrate summer with a barbeque or a picnic basket. A beautiful place where you can sit by the water and watch the swans, coots, and ducks. And in late August it's the centre of a theatre and dance event: the Noorderzon."



# THE BIG WORDS OF LEV

He's a philosopher, spoken word artist, and Campus Poet. He's also the son of migrants, and grew up in Presikhaaf, a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Arnhem. Lev Avitan evades categorisation. 'In my first year, I was hyper aware of how white the University is.'

*Text:* Stan van Pelt / *Photography:* Julie de Bruin







**B** “By the way...” says Lev Avitan. We’ve completed the interview and are walking back to our bicycles, parked on the South side of the Vasim, cultural breeding ground at the foot of the Oversteek. “Could you use my exact words and formulations in your article?” To the Philosophy student and spoken word artist language is a tool, a way to describe the world and peel arguments down to their core. Preferably with razor sharp precision. Choice of words matters.

Avitan makes a striking impression, even for a Philosophy student. Tanned skin, a light orange shirt that fits his body like a glove and displays the tattoos on his arms. Not really the standard model student from a Brabant, Limburg or Achterhoek family you usually encounter on Campus. But even for a coloured Dutch person, Avitan has a remarkable background, with an Israeli Jewish mother with Moroccan roots, and a Muslim Turkish father. The 22-year-old Bachelor’s student was born in the Netherlands, and grew up with his mother in the disadvantaged Arnhem neighbourhood Presikhaaf.

## ‘WHEN FRIENDS IMITATE MY ACCENT, I FEEL THEY DON’T TAKE ME SERIOUSLY.’

The theme of identity has dominated his entire life, he explains as we walk across the Vasim grounds. It also dominates today’s conversation. He explores this theme as a spoken word artist at Mensen Zeggen Dingen, one of the largest Dutch spoken word collectives. He also frequently performs in Brebl, on the former Honig grounds and – in his role as Campus Poet, at Radboud University.

*You have a rather eclectic CV (see below, Eds.). Is there any logic to it?*

“Ha ha, more than you’d think. At the intermediate vocational school where I followed a programme in Music, I used to make politically oriented hip hop on themes such as racism. My older sister suggested I train as a history

teacher, since I was always looking at things from a historical perspective. Philosophy, which is what I now study at Radboud University, is a natural next step. After all, philosophy is all about questioning the obvious, and I’m constantly questioning things. Why is society the way it is? Where do the dominant ideas come from?”

*Your mother is Jewish, your father a Muslim. Are you religious?*

“My mother followed the Old Testament, my father the Quran. Neither of them imposed their religion on me. I’m not religious; I rely on other things to give me strength. I do draw inspiration from religious texts. The Bible, for example, says we’re all equal – we simply have different capabilities.”

*You grew up in a difficult neighbourhood. Do you feel at home at a largely white university like Radboud University?*

“In my first year I was hyper aware of how white Radboud University is. I used to wear joggers because I thought they looked cool. But then I saw people thinking: Who is this guy? Why does he walk around dressed like that? I soon adjusted my clothes, because I didn’t want to feel judged. It was clearly self-censorship. These days I again choose my own style.”

*Did you manage to find your place in Nijmegen?*

“In the end, yes. Mostly thanks to Brebl, where I could grow as a poet, and Mensen Zeggen Dingen, which supported me in this process. I can see that my poems make people think.”

*Last year you appeared at the Down the Rabbit Hole festival. You shared that a club had once denied you entrance because of how you looked. How can you know that for sure?*

“This is exactly what my Dutch fellow students always ask! They cannot imagine this kind of discrimination, because they’ve never experienced it. So they trivialise it, and conclude it must be something else. And that while people with a similar background are quick to recognise themselves in my experience. They say: Why would you even try to get into that kind of club? This is where you can see how the environment in which you grow up colours your perspective on the world.”

*You could also say: Don’t take it so personally! After all, ours is a country of equal opportunities. You are living proof of this: a boy from a disadvantaged neighbourhood can also make it to university.*

---

| biography | **Lev Avitan** | born in | Doetinchem, 1996 | studies | Music (ROC), Bachelor of Education in History (HAN), Bachelor's in Philosophy (Radboud University)

# 'EVERYONE HAS A COLOURED PERCEPTION, INCLUDING ME'



“People who say such things have never been victims of racism. It’s about the little things, like not being hired for a job because your name sounds foreign. Here’s another example: my friends with Dutch roots sometimes imitate my accent, even when I produce perfectly grammatical sentences. They don’t mean to be offensive, but it really upsets me. I feel they don’t take me seriously.”

These kinds of experiences make people with a non-Dutch background hyper aware of their accent. This leads to some people not wanting to ask questions during lectures. At some point, they might think: if I’m not going to ask questions anyway, why bother going to lectures or work groups? This is how people end up being excluded.”

*Where do you think prejudice and racism come from?*

“People no longer work together across all social layers. Everyone is stuck in their own conclave, their own little bubble. Our physical spaces exacerbate this: the Campus is for academics, white people who live in the same kinds of neighbourhoods. Within companies too, design and production are implemented in separate departments, by people with different levels of education – because economically, it’s the most efficient approach.”

*How would you go about changing this?*

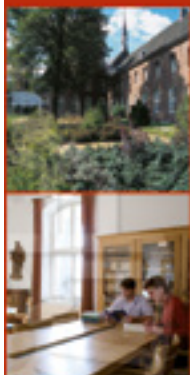
For the first time in our conversation, the ebullient Avitan falls silent for a moment. “This is the key question in all social movements. Everyone has a coloured perception, including me. It starts with people being aware of what’s going on, but obviously this doesn’t just happen by itself. When you confront people with their behaviour directly, you get resistance. People feel they need to justify themselves.”

I think what works best is bringing people together physically. When different layers of society meet from a young age onwards, they’re more likely to be open to mutual understanding, and this works to counteract these kinds of undesirable ideas and behaviour.”

*Can the University contribute to this in some way?*

“Absolutely! I’d say: collaborate more directly with universities of applied sciences and intermediate vocational institutions, which will make it easier to reach a wider and more diverse group of people. Now university students rarely meet students from universities of applied sciences and intermediate vocational institutions, even if they’re working on the same topic, for example in more technical study programmes. This lack of contact leads to university students being dismissive of ‘lower-level’ study programmes. I noticed this at the university of applied sciences where I completed my teacher training programme. The lecturers told us: in vocational schools, you just have to focus on being a good teacher. If you want content-related discussions, you need to go to the higher levels. This is just ridiculous. As if one cannot have an in-depth discussion with vocational education students!”

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# 'NOW UNIVERSITY STUDENTS RARELY MEET STUDENTS FROM HBO AND MBO'



## SUMMER TIP BY LEV AVITAN

“The **dance event Deep Sense**. If you enjoy house and techno, you really shouldn't miss it! What makes this event unique is that it provides a podium for local talent. My friend Colin S got his breakthrough thanks to them. In the fall, Deep Sense will take place in Luxor Live, in Arnhem, but if you're quick, you might still get in to the **June edition in Brebl**. And otherwise, you can always attend a spoken word event, for example at the **Arnhem Ruimtekoers Festival**.”



*But aren't diversity and accessibility already prominent on the University's agenda?*

“On paper perhaps. But I say: practise what you preach. I sometimes feel the Executive Board enjoys talking about diversity, but they're reluctant to put effort into it. Look at the decolonisation of the curriculum (taking a less white perspective on subjects such as history, politics, Eds.). Neither asap nor Akkuraatd made a point of it in their electoral programmes for the Student Council. Apparently this is such an unheard issue at Radboud University, it's not perceived as a point for discussion.”

*So we need more self-reflection.*

“Yes! We also need to be more critical of the content of our study programmes. Think about how these curriculums impact what students end up doing later. What is the added value for society of study programmes such as fiscal economy, which only helps corporations evade taxes? Or of marketing students who are really good at convincing customers to buy unhealthy products?”

*What does your ideal society look like?*

“My goal is a sustainable future for as many people as

possible. For our environment to become liveable again because our economies no longer focus on unlimited growth, but on the wellbeing of people and nature. Where people can thrive because they have access to education, health care and safety, with as high a standard of living as possible.”


*I think anyone would endorse that. Will you be the one to solve these problems?*

He laughs. “Yes, these are major problems. My old friends from Presikhaaf, who now work as car mechanics or postmen, help me keep my feet on the ground. ‘Do you even believe what you say?’ they ask me. ‘You use such big words, Lev!’”

He suddenly turns serious again. “Just the other day, a friend said to me: only when there is blood on the street will people be prepared to change their life. And I answered: but there's already blood on the streets, maybe not here, but elsewhere, from victims of climate change. Like the hurricanes in Mozambique this Spring. If we were to really recognise diversity, we would see that these people are the same as us, that their blood is our blood.” ★







# WHEN THE ADRENALINE TAKES OVER

Wilco Versteeg (33) is fascinated by violence. Nearly every Saturday, the photographer and Literature lecturer can be found among the yellow vests in Paris. 'If I see fewer than ten cars burning, I think to myself: boring!'

**Text:** Mathijs Noij / **Photography:** Wilco Versteeg



# 'J

**Just fell hard (...).** May have broken something.' A WhatsApp message from Wilco Versteeg. A moment later he emerges from the crowd on a small parallel street along the Boulevard Jules Ferry, his face contorted in pain, supporting his right arm with the left. His wounded elbow sports an odd protrusion.

Versteeg shoots his photographs of the yellow vests' riots in Paris with a 35 millimetre lens. Some photographers use a tele lens so as to keep a safe distance. But not Versteeg. If he wants to get a shot of what goes on in the front line of the demonstration, then that's where he has to be. With all the risks involved.

### **Bold popular protest**

Today is 20 April, and the yellow vests are planning their 23rd demonstration. A few hours before the start, activists start gathering on the square in front of the colossal Finance Ministry, near the Gare de Lyon. They've been meeting every Saturday for the last 23 weeks. What began as a protest against rising fuel prices has since morphed into a bold popular protest by anti-capitalists, hard-core and soft-core neo-Nazis, farmers, radical feminists, and other angry citizens, against the economic policies of President Emmanuel Macron. Some Saturdays, the demonstration proceeds without major incidents, other times shops are looted, cars put on fire, and police officers attacked and beaten.

Versteeg has been witness to many of these demonstrations. During the week, he teaches at Radboud University, but once his lectures are done he travels back to Paris, where he lives together with his Spanish girlfriend. "If at all possible, I make sure I attend the demonstrations. I think I may have missed six so far." He sells the resulting photographs and stories to *HP/De Tijd* and other sources, and posts a lot of his work on social media. In 2018, he was nominated for the Public Award of the Silver Camera, the Dutch photojournalism award.

Less than a week ago, the French capital once again drew much attention when the Notre Dame Cathedral caught fire. But this did nothing to slow the yellow vests down. On the contrary, the protesters were ignited by the astronomical gifts the French *riches* put towards the cathedral's restoration. "It promises to be another interesting day," predicts Versteeg.

### **Confrontation**

Even before the yellow vests start on their protest march through the city, some already have their first encounter with the police. The gendarmerie is blocking access to the Ministry. Beer bottles and firework bombs fly through the air, landing on and between the police vans. The armed and harnessed officers stare stoically ahead, ignoring the demonstrator's first provocations.

Not much later – the crowd is now on the move – the ice





PHOTO: JEROME CHOBEAUX

# 'I USUALLY NEED A DAY OR TWO TO RECOVER'



Wilco Versteeg at one of the yellow vests demonstrations



breaks, and the first tear gas grenade shoots through the air when a small group of yellow vests attack some police officers, who take flight in an attempt to escape the rioters.

Attacks and counter-attacks make up the rest of the day. On the Quai de Jemmapes, in front of McDonald's, a group of yellow vests is trying to provoke a line of seriously outnumbered police officers. At some point, probably in response to a charge by the officers, the mob starts to run. Versteeg is forced to follow, but he falls hard on his arm. One of the activists helps him to his feet.

As the yellow vests proceed to break through a police barrier and advance towards the Place de la République, the photographer follows, despite the pain. "I'm OK," he says as he tries to shoot a photograph here and there with his non-dominant left hand.

'République', we were told beforehand, is the endpoint of today's march. But having reached the square doesn't mean the demonstration is over. To prevent yellow vests from spreading through the city, the police has blocked off all access roads leading to the square. A water cannon keeps the crowd at bay, as clouds of tear gas fill the square. The terrifying plopping sound of fired rubber bullets is heard at regular intervals. A wounded activist is carried off, cheered on by bystanders.

Versteeg asks for help from a paramedic, who brings us across one of the police barriers. There we shake hands – in Versteeg's case, his non-wounded left hand – and part ways. He goes off to a hospital, while I retreat to calmer quarters in the sunny French capital.

Three hours later, I get another WhatsApp message. "Two simple fractures. I'll have to be operated."

## Focus

Three days after the demonstration, Versteeg joins me at the Rafter, on the Nijmegen Campus, his arm in a sling, his face betraying signs of fatigue. He's just finished teaching a literature lecture to American Studies students. The days preceding Saturday are always more fun than those that follow, as the adrenalin rush is then replaced by a hollow sense of fatigue. "I usually need a day or two to recover. I'm really in a bad mood on those days." Pointing to his arm: "Now there's this too. It doesn't make me any more cheerful, but I guess I'll just have to live with it."

In preparation for a demonstration, Versteeg's body slowly builds up a healthy tension, right up until the demonstra-





The yellow vests demonstrations on Saturdays through the lens of Wilco Versteeg





tion itself, when adrenalin takes over. “Adrenalin makes me sharp and super-focused. When I see or hear something, I immediately want to move towards it. What’s the quickest route? Is it safe? Thanks to my experience with demonstrations, I can now assess these things very quickly.”

The yellow vests’ riots usually start in the morning and last all day. “When you have to remain focused for so long, at some point you kind of transcend yourself. Your attention is fully on the now, and you feel like you’re part of what’s happening. It’s an interesting experience.”

Last Saturday was pretty rough, says Versteeg, although with fewer than ten thousand demonstrators, it wasn’t a particularly large demonstration. “It was chaotic though. I kept getting to places too late and I missed a lot. There wasn’t a single moment when things went smoothly. Maybe that’s why I fell: I wasn’t quick enough to respond.” The police was also particularly repressive, he says. “They shot a lot of rubber bullets.”

It was the first time Versteeg got injured in a demonstration. “I always keep in mind that I could get hurt. But I guess I always thought more of getting something in my eye, or maybe a head injury.” So far, he’s been very lucky – especially the time when a Molotov cocktail caused a flame jet to erupt less than a metre away. He shows me a photograph by a fellow photographer of himself dodging the flames. “I’ve been shot in the back with a rubber bullet a few times. They leave pretty bad bruises that hurt for a few weeks, but it’s not such a big deal.”

The first time Versteeg visited the yellow vests, he was amazed by the diversity among the activists, and by the violent and uncontrolled character of their demonstrations. “Far-left and far-right are all mixed together. I was really amazed!”

After seventeen Saturdays following in the yellow vests’ footsteps, Versteeg is starting to get a better sense of the movement. “There’s also been quite a lot of research on them. The yellow vests partially arose out of existing action groups that used to protest against former President François Hollande.” According to Versteeg, many of the French yellow vests are right to far-right. “The anti-Semitism, racism, and belief in complot theories among the demonstrators continue to amaze me.”

### Quiet childhood

The big question – for Versteeg too – is why he constantly seeks danger. “I think about it a lot. Nobody tells me to attend these demonstrations. It’s something I do on my own initiative. I can come up with all kinds of clues as to my motives, but ultimately, I just do what I do. I don’t know why either.”

His childhood may be one of these clues. Versteeg’s father was an amateur broadcaster, and when his radio accidentally intercepted an emergency announcement, the entire family would jump in the car to get a look at the fire or accident. At home, young Wilco spent hours watching CNN, which at the time mostly covered the Iraq and Balkan wars. And no newspaper was safe, as he filled folder after folder with clippings of collapsed houses and burnt cars.

“I had a happy childhood. My parents are still together, and we went on holiday every year. Maybe this is the root of my fascination for violence – the idea that there’s more to life than a quiet existence in Deventer. That real life happens elsewhere.”

There is also – though he’s loath to admit it – an addictive aspect to it. The yellow vests don’t seem likely to stop anytime soon, so every Saturday offers a new opportunity for an adrenalin kick. And every Saturday, Versteeg

## ‘FAR-LEFT AND FAR-RIGHT ARE ALL MIXED TOGETHER’

is overtaken by the irrational, uncontrolled hope that the yellow vests will take things a step further. “If I see less than ten cars burning, I think to myself: boring! And I’m never quite satisfied unless I get a shot of someone who’s just lost their hand.”

He thinks being forced to take it easy for a few weeks is a good thing. “The demonstrations tire me out. It’s getting to be too much, especially with all the travelling from Paris to Nijmegen and back. Photographically too, it’s not as satisfying as it used to be – it gets a bit repetitive after a while.”

### Crossroads

Versteeg is at a crossroads in his life anyway. “I’m reaching the conclusion that the life I’ve lived these past years is coming to an end. As a photographer, I’d like to develop in other areas, and as a young researcher, it’s also time I made more of an effort to profile myself. I do have this need to assert myself – to get the most out of myself. Maybe because I started out with only a vocational degree (VMBO). With every step up the ladder, I thought: I’m probably reaching too high. Now I’ve completed my PhD, and I need a new challenge.”

Paris has become his city. Versteeg first arrived there on an Erasmus grant and was given the opportunity to write a PhD on the history of war photography. In the winter of 2015, while struggling with a writer’s block on his PhD research, terrorists attacked the office of cartoonist magazine Charlie Hebdo. This was followed two days later by a hostage-taking in a Jewish supermarket, not far from his studio. Versteeg used his camera to capture the confusion and fear that took hold of the French capital, and that only deepened later that year with the Bataclan bloodbath.





SUMMER  
TIP BY  
WILCO  
VERSTEEG

“There aren’t many places in Paris that I don’t associate with violence, except the **Botanical Garden** with its many natural history museums. Fantastic minerals, amazing fossils, remarkable weeds and everyday flowers: something to suit every mood.”



He feels at home in Paris, but the call of the Netherlands is strong. Versteeg’s girlfriend – a Spanish brain scientist – really wants children, and he himself is also keen, although he prefers to raise them in the Netherlands rather than in metropolitan Paris. “I grew up in Deventer, in a terrace house with a garden. It’s how I imagine family life. Now I live in a busy city, without any nature around. It’s very valuable to grow up in a place where you can catch a glimpse of a sparrow.”

At the same time, Versteeg is also toying with the idea of a radically different lifestyle: that of war journalist. In East Ukraine for example. As part of his current research, Versteeg analyses the social media posts of a radical pro-Russian militia in the area. Clearly, he already has some affinity with the war there.

“Becoming a war photographer would be a logical next step. I’ve gotten to know myself as a person who remains calm in violent situations.” But the idea of turning his back on academia doesn’t appeal to him. “I find it important for photography to co-exist with my work as a researcher. The combination keeps me healthy. At the same time, researchers sometimes run the risk of getting divorced from reality. My work as a journalist helps me keep my feet firmly on the ground.”

**War photographer**

There is another factor drawing Versteeg back to the Netherlands. His father, a former sailor with beard and

tattoo, suffers from Alzheimer’s. “It’s good for me to spend time with him, and to relieve my mother a little. I take my dad out for walks or cycling, and we chat. These are my truly happy moments, which no amount of photographing a bunch of idiots in Paris can compete with.”

Sometimes, Versteeg grabs his camera and captures his father in his own confused world. “He enjoys that. ‘Is that me?’ he asks when I show him the pictures. Just the other day, he was looking out the window, and he asked me: ‘Did you make that beautiful blue sky?’ Spending time with my father, I learn in a very tender, moving, and also poetical way to look at the world through his eyes. And I learn so much from it – it makes me realise: you could see it that way too!”

Still, there are some among his own photographs that Versteeg would rather not look at. A shot he took that clearly shows the panic in his father’s eyes. Or a photograph of him playing with Lego. “It’s hard to see a strong man like my father like this. The roles have switched: I’m now the one who helps him understand things. At the same time, I think: this is how it is now, and it has to be seen and captured.”

Just as with the Paris riots, Versteeg’s camera helps him keep some distance. “The camera objectifies reality. I’m there, but there’s something between me and reality. With my father, luckily I need this distance less and less.” ★

| biography | **Wilco Versteeg** | born in | Deventer, 1986 | studies | Bachelors' in American Studies and Philosophy (Nijmegen), Master's in Arts and Literature (Nijmegen)

## NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY STUDENT COUNCIL AND THE WORKS COUNCIL

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# POINT TAKEN!

## University Student Council

Dear readers,

We've got updates on the University Student Council (USC)! If you don't want to miss the latest Council news, you can follow the USC on Facebook and Instagram.

### Election results

De verkiezingen zijn geweest! Volgend studiejaar nemen asap en AKKURAAT elk met vier zetels zitting in de Universitaire Studentenraad. Alle studenten die hun stem hebben uitgebracht: bedankt!

### Differences in opinion within the USC

A number of articles have appeared on voxweb.nl concerning differences of opinion on the collaboration between parties within the USC. The 2018-2019 USC has opted for technical chairmanship. AKKURAAT, asap and the appointed members of the student umbrella associations have selected a technical Chair for the last two months of this academic year. Nanne van Mil, Political Officer of the NSSR, has agreed to take on the job ([m.vanmil@student.ru.nl](mailto:m.vanmil@student.ru.nl)). All parties are due to meet shortly to discuss how to collaborate in the coming year, in the interests of student participation and Radboud University.

### Update:

#### An increase in the Student Financial Support Fund!

On 27 May, President of the Executive Board Daniël Wigboldus announced that the Student Financial Support Fund (Profileringfonds) will be raised by €104,000. He called this 'a beautiful example of what can be achieved through collaboration.'

This increase was triggered by a remark by USC concerning the fact that the Fund had not increased in parallel with the number of students. The Executive Board agreed with the USC that something had to be done about it. The USC and Student Life then put together a joint proposal. The additional funds will be made available to student administrators who accrue study delay as a result of personal circumstances such as illness, pregnancy, or volunteer care.

If you wish to find out about the financial support available and how Radboud University can help you, go to [www.ru.nl/studenten](http://www.ru.nl/studenten) and click via 'Tijdens je studie' (During Your Studies) and 'Begeleiding en advies' (Support and Guidance) to 'Financiële ondersteuning' (Financial Support).

## Works Council

### Vote for the Works Council

New round, new opportunities? Later on this year, a new strategic plan is due to be presented. And it looks very promising. Because that is what strategic plans are for: to offer a vision of a promising future. If Radboud University still wants to be around in 2040, it will simply have to move with the times. But no worries: there's no doubt Radboud University will still have a role to play in future, especially if we all join forces now.

Still, some effort is required, and ambition may at times be counter-productive when resources are limited. Over the past years, it's become clear where our challenges lie. You can't endlessly raise your expectations of people, and expect this to have no consequences. For an organisation such as Radboud University, the most important capital is people, so you'd expect the University to do everything in its power to care for its staff. Devote serious attention to issues such as work pressure. Make sure Radboud University is known as an organisation that is aware and supportive of diversity. One that assesses its staff on more meaningful criteria than publication figures alone. A place where researchers and administrators are equally valued, and where the systems in use help people do their work better. Wouldn't it be great, if all of this was included in the strategic plan?



All we have to do is tweak the current plans so they meet everybody's needs. This is our job as Works Council (OR): to critically consider the visions that come our way and if needed send them back to the drawing board. The Works Council is the only body within the University that informs the Executive Board of the day-to-day reality of working at the University, and points to potential challenges and bottlenecks. This is why it's important to let your voice be heard in the Works Council. This too is part of creating a promising future.





PIETER ROELOFS

# 'PROTECTOR OF THE NIGHT WATCH'

The Night Watch runs like a thread through the life of Pieter Roelofs, Head of Paintings and Sculpture at the Rijksmuseum. He's closely involved in the masterpiece's restoration, due to start this summer. He studied Art History in Nijmegen.

**Text:** Martine Zuidweg / **Photography:** Duncan de Fey









**“Look here.”** Pieter Roelofs points to something on the Night Watch. The last visitor was swallowed by the Amsterdam city centre two hours ago, and a deep silence hangs over the Gallery of Honour of the Rijksmuseum. Followed by the *Vox* journalist and

photographer, Roelofs, Head of Paintings and Sculpture at the Rijksmuseum, makes his way through the museum’s white-plastered hallways, up the deserted staircases, all the way to Rembrandt’s most illustrious painting. A passing guard nods to Roelofs and disappears into the empty museum.

“Come a little closer,” says Roelofs, as he steps across the tightly stretched cord. Just a moment ago, he was telling us how skilful Rembrandt van Rijn was in guiding the viewer’s gaze. In this case towards the hand of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq, the shadow of which falls precisely on his lieutenant’s coat. And lo and behold, between the shadow’s thumb and index, the coat is embroidered with the Coat of Arms of Amsterdam.

## ‘WE WANT TO PASS ON THE PAINTING IN MINT CONDITION’

This is the most exquisite element of the Night Watch, says Roelofs, because it expresses precisely what the painting is all about: the militia of Amsterdam protecting its citizens against intruders, at the time the Spaniards.

From a historical perspective, this is a unique phenomenon: across the world, it was the nobility rather than the common people who were responsible for protecting city and land. What’s more, Rembrandt doesn’t portray his marksmen in neat rows, easily recognisable and brightly coloured. “He does something completely

unusual that distinguishes him from all his contemporaries. Rembrandt doesn’t focus on people, but on the action. He’s putting together a theatrical production. He paints the militia as they march out; the lines of the weapons held by the men suggest movement. He creates depth and tension with muted colours in the background and bright colours in the foreground. He uses every single art theoretical tool at his disposal to tell a story.”

The Night Watch hangs in the best spot in the museum. In 1885, architect Pierre Cuypers designed the Rijksmuseum as a cathedral to art, with the Night Watch in place of honour on the high altar. And this is where it’s hung pretty much ever since. Only twice did the painting slide down the giant letterbox, unobtrusively positioned just below it, into the passage outside: once during World War II, and once in preparation for a major renovation in 2003.

### White haze

This summer the painting is due to be restored, for the 26th time in four centuries. A white haze has developed around the little dog. Vague patches have appeared in Banninck Cocq’s clothing. There are signs of wear and tear here and there. The times when the painting was attacked with knife or acid have left their traces, and the over-painting is starting to show through. “Nothing dramatic, just small things we want to understand and address. We feel responsible for passing the painting on to our children and grand-children in mint condition. That’s why we decided that now is the time to use all the technology and expertise at our disposal, and to join forces with restorers, researchers and curators.” This led to a detailed analysis of the painting’s current state, following which the experts formulated a treatment plan.

The Night Watch will be taken down from the wall and out of its frame, and stretched onto an easel created especially for the occasion. A platform lift will accommodate the state-of-the-art research equipment used by the experts to examine all the individual paint layers: from varnish and top layer all the way to the canvas. “We get to see something that was never meant to be seen. We can follow all of Rembrandt’s thought processes on the canvas.” And not only those of the master painter. Rembrandt was a company. He worked with pupils, many of whom contributed to the final product. “By

studying the painting this closely, we may be able to distinguish differences in hand.” The public is invited to follow the restorers’ progress via a glass wall (and online). Not a day will go by when the Night Watch will not be visible.

### Fun

Pieter Roelofs was ten years old when he first stood up in public to talk about Rembrandt. The place: his primary school in Druten. Following that first school presentation, Roelofs never entirely freed himself from the 17th century master. He visited museums, including the Rijksmuseum, with his little sister. Their parents took them “because they could see we thought museums were really fun”.

Roelofs went on to study Art History at Radboud University, and at the age of 19, found himself once again in front of the Night Watch. He can remember the moment precisely, as the painting became the subject of a heated discussion between his professor, Christian Tümpel, and Art Historian Egbert Haverkamp Begemann. “Right there and then, something amazing happened between these two men.” Listening to them talking, Roelofs the student suddenly

## LONG LIVE REMBRANDT

Rembrandt is hot, as apparent from the viewer figures of Project Rembrandt, an amateur painting competition that’s been broadcast on Dutch TV over the past months in honour of the Rembrandt Year (the painter died 350 years ago). Roelofs was one of the two permanent jury members.

In the programme’s wake, the Rijksmuseum is due to open an exhibition entitled ‘Long Live Rembrandt’, showcasing six hundred artworks by amateurs – all inspired by Rembrandt. Roelofs personally reviewed photographs of all 9000 submissions. Projects such as these fit in perfectly with his mission: to make it clear that art is by and for everyone. “We’re constantly thinking of ways to make the museum more relevant and more open.”

understood the profound significance of the Night Watch for Dutch art. “There are moments in life you know you’ll remember forever, and for me, that was such a moment.”

As a student, he specialised in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art. “We had a very active student club at the Department of Art History. We launched an art historical magazine, *Desipientia*, and the fun thing is it still exists.” After a short stint as researcher, Roelofs worked for three years as curator at Museum Het Valkhof, where he was responsible, among other things, for organising an exhibition entitled ‘Brothers of Limburg: Masters at the French Court’. It was a great hit. He’s worked for the Rijksmuseum for thirteen years now. To him, the second floor, with its masterpieces from the Golden Age, is like one big candy store.

Roelofs leads his visitors past portraits of rich burghers in white ruffs, paintings of sea battle victories, Delft Blue china, and dollhouses used by the rich to copy the interior design of their own houses. It’s actually a bit of a miracle that the Netherlands has such a large collection of 17th century paintings, explains Roelofs as we walk. In the Golden Age, the Netherlands produced six to ten million paintings, but the large majority disappeared abroad just a century later. “Catherine the Great shipped masses of paintings to Saint-Petersburg, and industrialists took some to America. When we started collecting paintings for the new Rijksmuseum building in 1885, the market had been pretty much skimmed.”

Swapping is the way museums have found to temporarily expand their collections for exhibitions. ‘I loan you something, then you loan me something back.’ With its top collection, the Rijksmuseum is in a strong negotiation position. “Which we use to benefit the Netherlands Collection,” Roelofs is quick to add. “We are now sending one of our pieces to Berlin, in exchange for which the Museum Prinsenhof Delft can borrow a painting. We often do this. We find it important for culture to be visible and widely accessible across the Netherlands.”

### **Champions League**

Roelofs and his colleagues are always on the look-out for new art: an undiscovered Jan Steen or a Rembrandt from a private collection that becomes available. The museums are in contact with collectors and rich families, like the Rothschilds, who own paintings by the great masters. Whenever something becomes available, players like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the National Gallery of Art in Washington are quick to pounce. He laughs: “At times, it’s like the Champions League.”



**‘THE ENTIRE  
WORLD  
COMES  
TOGETHER  
HERE’**





COLUMN

## Lucy's law

**Lucienne van der Geld** is a lecturer of notarial law and director of Network Notarissen.

### Rollercoaster

The year 1959 marked the publication of *The Mind of the Moralist*, a groundbreaking book on Sigmund Freud. The name of sociologist Philip Rieff appeared on the cover, and this made him instantly famous. The first editions of the book still included

a note of thanks to his by then ex-wife Susan Sontag. Sontag and Rieff got married in 1950, ten days after their first meeting (she was one of his students), and their son was born soon after. They separated in 1959.

A biography of Sontag is due to appear this autumn. Her biographer recently revealed an interesting fact: the book on Sigmund Freud was not written by Philip Rieff, but by Susan Sontag. In their divorce agreement, she apparently waived her rights to the book in Rieff's favour because she was afraid he might try to keep her from seeing their son.

A divorce agreement deals with the financial consequences of a divorce. It also includes agreements about the children. Divorce is often an emotional rollercoaster and it's not easy at such times to make agreements and oversee their consequences. In practice, the person who feels 'guilty' about the divorce tends to be more lenient and settle for less. But there may be other reasons why people choose to relinquish some of their rights.

You can write up your own divorce agreement without help from a legal expert, but once you sign it, it becomes legally binding. If you later have regrets, or realise you were confused when signing it, you basically have to ask a judge to break the divorce agreement open. Did Susan Sontag ever regret her decision? I don't know. Maybe her biography will shed light on this matter. Either way, even without credit for her first book on Sigmund Freud, Sontag managed to be very successful, in work and in love.

Trained eyes are the tool of his trade. If a painting has been overpainted, Roelofs can see it. "You can see it for example when you look at the layers. If paint was added later on, the background doesn't shine through the top layer anymore." But he doesn't exclude the possibility that his eyes might betray him. Two years ago, a colleague from the Louvre almost bought a Frans Hals, but it turned out to be forged. "It makes you think: with our current technology, how can we still fall for it? Art forgery is of all times, so I can't guarantee that there isn't a single fake among the seven thousand paintings of the Rijksmuseum. But we do systematically and regularly put our entire collection to the test using the newest technologies." The Louvre discovered 20th century pigment fragments in the painting's first layer.

Roelofs still lives in Nijmegen. And he's proud of it too. "Surely I'm allowed a bit of local chauvinism, no? I feel I'm an ambassador for Nijmegen." The exhibition organised 18 months ago on the mediaeval painter Johan Maelwael, who came from Nijmegen, was Roelofs' idea. And it's thanks to him that the painting by Albert Cuyp entitled *River Landscape with Horsemen*, with a view of the polder near Nijmegen, now hangs in a beautiful spot in the Gallery of Honour. As his visitors stare in wonder at the landscape, he smiles. "The painter's pumped up the moraine to make the scene more romantic and dramatic. And do you see this golden yellow in the background? He's added Italian light. This is what 17th century painters like to do: manipulate the viewer."

Back in the 17th century, Nijmegen was a top location, says Roelofs. "Half the Rembrandt School were there, maybe even Rembrandt himself. It was a remarkable, atypical slice of Dutch landscape. The Valkhof also made a deep impression on artists, as one of the largest castles in the Low Countries."

### Playmobil

Did we know, by the way, that Nijmegen also has a kind of Rijksmuseum? The old Canisius College on the Berg en Dalseweg looks very much like the Rijksmuseum in terms of its design. It was built by Nicolaas Molenaar, a pupil of Cuypers, and contains a miniature version of the Rijksmuseum's magnificent library. Just something Roelofs thought he'd mention in passing.

Back to the Night Watch. Does he still look at the famous militia portrait every day? "I try to come as often as I can, and listen to what people are saying as they stand here. The entire world comes together here; there's a kind of energy hub."

"Papa," asked Roelofs' then five-year old son as they stood looking at the Night Watch, "is there a Playmobil version of these people?" Roelofs suggested the idea to his colleagues, six or seven years ago, assuming no one would be interested. "But they were all enthusiastic." Now, when he's at the Metropolitan Museum for work, and happens to see a Playmobil version of Captain Frans Banninck Cocq and his lieutenant at the museum store, he's reminded of how small things can start. \*

## SUMMER TIP BY PIETER ROELOFS

"During the Four Days Marches, you can find me at **Festival op 't Eiland**. Highly recommended if you want to get away from the bustle of the city. A lovely relaxed atmosphere – also for parents of young children – with the best view you can imagine: the River Waal with the profile of Nijmegen in the background."



# AGENDA



## GENERAL

[www.ru.nl/studentenkerk](http://www.ru.nl/studentenkerk)

**23 JUNE**, 11 am: Church-on-the-Lap. For the youngest among us (children aged 0 to 4), their parents, grand-parents, and caretakers, the Student Chaplaincy organises sparkling and experience-oriented worship celebrations. Listen together to a story, sing songs, and through play find out more about faith. Location: Student Chaplaincy.

## RADBOUD SPORTS CENTRE

[www.ru.nl/rsc](http://www.ru.nl/rsc)

**28 JUNE**, 1 pm: Radboud Sports. Which faculty will win the Battle of the Faculties? Sign up with your own team and compete for your

faculty's victory. If you prefer to discover a new sport by yourself, try out spinning, kick boxing or archery at the Sports Festival, or join us for a Campus hike or yoga in the park. Location: Radboud Sports Centre.

## STAFF ASSOCIATION

[www.ru.nl/pv](http://www.ru.nl/pv)

**30 JUNE**, 2.30 pm: Anniversary Concert by the Radboud Senior Choir. To celebrate its 30th anniversary, the Radboud Senior Choir gives a concert full of songs from different countries. Come and listen to folk songs from England, the US, and South Africa, and enjoy yesterday's top hits. Location: De Ark van Oost.

## Radboud Reflects

[www.ru.nl/radboudreflects](http://www.ru.nl/radboudreflects)

**20 JUNE**, 8.30 pm: Talk, Talk, but No Listening. Why do conversations so often go wrong? We don't listen attentively, we try to convince, or we misinterpret what the other person says, says Noelle Aarts. Join us under the Waalbrug and find out more about the science behind a good conversation. Location: De Kaaij.

**14 JULY**, 6.30 pm: Cheating. Radboud Reflects @ Festival Op 't Eiland. Why do people cheat on each other? Come and listen to Theologian Liesbeth Jansen and find out how our perspectives on cheating have evolved throughout history. Location: Bosco Theatertent.

**16 JULY**, 6.30 pm: Unhealthy Eating: Are You to Blame? Radboud Reflects @ Festival Op 't Eiland. Shops are full of diet books, yet at the same time, we are surrounded by tempting unhealthy products. Are you personally responsible for what you eat? According to Ethicist Tjidde Tempels, the answer's not so obvious. Location: Bosco Theatertent.

**18 JULY**, 6.30 pm: Your Mind is Not a Thing. Radboud Reflects @ Festival Op 't Eiland. Lecture by Philosopher Frank van Caspel. He believes the term 'mind' refers to a set of mental activities, not a 'thing' to be found somewhere in our body. Come and learn to think differently about your mind. Location: Bosco Theatertent.

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# POEM

## STRATEGISCH ESSENTIALIST

ik ben het singuliere Ik  
het unieke Zelf dat *hier* begint  
en *hier* eindigt

leer mij kennen  
en beseft dat er niets méér  
aan mij is dan  
ikzelf

ieder idee-fixe vastgezet op mij  
doet afbreuk – aan wat ik in werkelijkheid ben

ik ben geen man / dus noem mij niet zo!  
ik heb dat idee in het wild gezien  
en het hield in: beter moeten zijn  
dan mijn naaste en als ik daarin  
faalde dan raakte ik alle aanspraak  
op mijn “mannelijkheid” kwijt

ga toch fietsen  
ik bepaal zelf wel hoe ik met mensen omga

ik ben ook geen Turk, Marokkaan noch Nederlander  
niet slechts omdat ik me de culturele waarde van alle drie  
niet volledig toegeëigend heb, maar omdat het  
te weinig zegt over wie ik in feite ben

ik ben niet links  
niet rechts  
ben ik *iets*, dan ben ik radicaal sociaal,  
want één ding is zeker:

ik ben *hier* – met jullie

en ik ga ervan uit dat niemand een lopende sticker is  
met *vrouw* erop geschreven, of *immigrant*,  
of whatever concept dat de dominante  
meerderheid op jou heeft geplakt

mijns inziens zijn we niet eens *mens*  
ook die idee hebben wij  
allang overstegen

LEV AVITAN IS THE OFFICIAL CAMPUS POET THIS ACADEMIC YEAR. EACH MONTH HE WRITES A POEM (IN DUTCH) FOR VOX.



