

Preface

Steev Lemerrier was the first merman I ever met. He is a musician.

One year ago I decided to invite him on a boating voyage along the canals of Belgium where I live, that is, right in front of the Brussels-Charleroi canal in the commune of Molenbeek-Saint-Jean, in Brussels. Prior to our encounter, I had spent long hours ‘gongoozling’ from my window during the spring of 2015 and had seen cargo barges, leisure yachts, rowing canoes and other vessels pass by. But at that point in time I had seen no merpeople.

During the winter of 2016 I went to Berlin, in Germany, where Steev lives, to deliver my invitation. His apartment is near Görlitzer Park; it has grand windows that open onto a wide avenue, which features an elevated metro track supported by

Gothic Revival arches and transited by little yellow carriages. I was sitting on a sofa in the living room when I met Chanel and Dolce, a cat and a dog, who accompany Steev to most of the places he goes. After a walk around the park we decided to make the canal journey all together: first we would live at the Royers lock-keeper's house in the port of Antwerp, in Belgium, and later in summer we would embark upon the canal boat *Buratinas* in Brussels.

There exists an extensive bibliography of historical and technical descriptions of the canals in Belgium, and since the opening of these inland waterways many travelogues, boating manuals and travel guides have been published every year; they are filled with historical, geographical and political descriptions of the canals by partial and interested authors who write about both their infrastructural and landscape features. A merman could participate in shaping the ecosystem of some of the Belgian canals too, I thought; merpeople have long been included in the narrative of European colonial ocean navigation, which is one central reason for the development of canal networks. Merpeople sing and lure sailors to sink boats, and are sculpted on their bows.

Steev was excited about a journey on the canals. In his apartment in Berlin he told me that he was fed up with the city and could use some days on water to rehearse some songs. When in Belgium, he would make a remarkable impression.

Once back in Brussels, in the Museum of Industry and Labour, I found a journal recounting the history of the recreational use of the Belgian canals that includes a reproduction of a lithograph by Louise Oury that announces its subject to be 'Venice in Brussels'. There is no sign of any local architecture in the lithograph, instead the Rialto bridge that crosses the Grand Canal and a troubadour dominate the scene. It would appear that there was once an exhibition that reproduced the Italian city of Venice in the surroundings of the bridge of Laken, in Brussels, between the months of May and November, 1896. I also read in *The New York Times* that in Florida, USA, merpeople have been performing daily since the 1940s in the underwater theatre at Weeki Wachee Springs amusement park. Built directly into the limestone side of the spring that feeds the Weeki Wachee river, the theatre can accommodate a numerous audience in front of a large glass through which they can see the turquoise water, fish, turtles and merpeople playing Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid* and other tales.

Parallel to the numerous and diverse theatrical uses of the waterways, our voyage in the summer of 2016 delivered a private sort of performance as we passed by almost unnoticed while journeying from Antwerp to Leuven, past Brussels, Vilvoorde, Klein Willebroek and Mechelen. The following pages integrate a vast array of canal literature to tell a tale set on water, before leisure scenery and multiple industrial and post-industrial views of Belgium, with a flamboyant portrait of

Steev in the company of Chanel and Dolce, made during the first months of our friendship.

Brussels, December 2016

Prologue

When I first saw Steev I was on a roof terrace in Istanbul, Turkey, and he was singing. I was in town to attend the opening of the fourteenth Istanbul Biennial during the late summer of 2015 – after that evening I would sojourn in the city for a further month.

One hour earlier I had been following Gökcan Demirkazık around the city. I think he was drunk and I am sure that I was drunk. We had drunk so much that, while walking, I could hear the liquids inside us sounding, ‘Slosh, slosh, slosh,’ making waves like water does inside a bottle inside a handbag. It felt that we were really going somewhere fabulous because he said to me, ‘You *will* love this place’, and also because I was new to Istanbul and we were walking very quickly.

Many people surrounded me on the roof terrace and because

we were very near the water there were also many seagulls. At our back was the Galata Tower, a cylindrical cone-capped stone construction that is one of the landmarks of the city. The Galata Tower was lit up in purple and pink, or perhaps the lights were blue and pink and made a purple effect when mixed.

Gökcan had not brought me there to admire a gigantic dildo but to join the event on the roof, which was part of a series of soirées coinciding with the opening of the biennial but organised by the arts festival Pane Per Poveri and hosted by the founder of the gallery Rodeo, based at the time between Istanbul and London, England – although the Istanbul branch has since closed. While the scenario seemed very fancy to me on arrival, the place soon felt very welcoming and relaxed. It was a sort of haven away from the boring official cocktail parties of the biennial and it was high up, right under the sky.

Steev was sitting on a bench in front of me, and the rest of the audience, with a tiny lamp by his side and seagulls spinning around his head. His tail was like that of a fish and it was blue, and his fin was resting on the floor, sometimes rhythmically tapping to the beat of the music. On his head he wore a blue and purple wig topped with a crown of paper flowers and he was also wearing very heavy make-up; but rather than looking neat it made him resemble a singer from a rock band. Steev has a dark beard and a single, elongated eyebrow that crosses the bridge of his nose, which gives him the air of a distinctive character.

His tail started to swing as he sang beautiful songs over a pre-recorded melody that was playing from his laptop. The lyrics narrated stories about sailors, the sea, the waves, a submariner and a lighthouse. Sometimes he was using a vocal reverb pedal, which is a little metallic electric gadget, to modulate his voice.

The concert lasted for around half an hour and I stared at Steev at all times. From where I was standing the vista was broad and I could feel the city all around me.