

**A conversation between Layla van der Oord and Johan Engqvist  
about 'Walk the talk,' a short story that can be experienced online at  
<http://laylavanderoord.nl/walk-the-talk>**

*27th of March, 2021*

**L** Hey Johan, thank you for talking with me today. I thought it would be nice to publish a conversation about the short story I'm producing. The other day you looked at an unfinished version on the website.

**J** Is the finished work going to be online?

**L** Yes. Within the last few weeks I realized a physical exhibition is really not happening. A website has been the plan B from the beginning. Plus, this publishing form makes sense during the pandemic.

**J** If you ignore the MA Fine Arts course and the current situation, what would be the ultimate way for this story to connect to the reader or viewer?

**L** Honestly, I really wanted to make a publication. But I've also had an interest in making websites for a long time, something that I just didn't get around to. Now I've been forced to learn how to do that. That's not really an answer though, haha.

**J** Let's get to an important question: what is the work?

**L** The work I've been making is a story about a post messenger who starts a new job at an island. A small island where the inhabitants -there are about fifty households -are all gathered on the island to live tech free lives. Quiet lives. They finance their existence by having a tourism sector on the other side of the island. The main character, the post worker, is asked to communicate between the inhabitants of the island. She's delivering paper mail but while she's doing that she's basically asked to pass on some verbal messages. That gets more and more to the point where she's acting out the body language, the use of the voice, and all that, of the people. She becomes an actor.. What she thought would be quite a good easy job turns out to be much heavier. She has to work every day and the promise was that the shift would last around five hours a day, but it's much more work. She gets very tired and confused about which part of the work she's doing is paid, and what she is doing as a person. The boundaries between who she is as a worker and who she is as a person are blurred. Until it sinks in after a few years that she is giving too much.

**J** So the question of what is labour, and what is a private life, is present.

**L** Yes, that's the big topic that's carrying the story. That and communication in itself. It's heavily inspired by my own side jobs in the hospitality sector, where I always had a lot of regulars. My colleagues and I really kept up with their lives in a way. I would come home after a long shift and I would have to talk for an hour to my partner about all the little stories I heard, and I would realize while talking that I didn't care that much but I still had to unload. And when you are social as a worker you still have to behave. You cannot always be honest. Then in 2019 I started as a bike messenger,

which is so much calmer. The combination of those side jobs let me make up this story.

**J** I can relate to the feeling of having to listen to people for a full day, staying polite, and it's like you become a bit of a container for people to dump their shit into. When you home you need to find a place to dump it.

**L** Yeah.

**J** When one is listening to all of these people and you have to act as a container that they can put everything in but you have to stay polite and professional in a way... is the main character in your story honest, or does she have to store it?

**L** The real journey of the character is the shift in that. She thinks she is doing everything out of her free will. She stays polite out of respect for the people -they are a little bit older. Later on she has to pass on arguments. Towards the end she learns to draw a line between work and private. And in that she will be less polite.

**J** Does the island really exist? The island is cut off, isolated from the mainland. Is there an idea behind you using an island as a setting?

**L** Yeah but it's really practical. Within writing you talk about something called the arena: the locations where your scenes take place. I thought it would be manageable to have an island as an arena. I made up the story before the pandemic. Now the story is very relatable because everybody has their own island or a couple of islands: home, work, school, a few select friends or relatives.

Visually I drew from the Dutch Northern islands because I'm homesick. I wanted to spend time in Dutch landscapes. I wanted specifically to depict Dutch beaches instead of Scandinavian ones. I hate the rocks, haha. I want proper beaches.

**J** Are Dutch beaches more sandy?

**L** We don't have any rocks or cliffs in general. It's just grass, asphalt, and sand, and clay. At least that sums up my region. I used google maps street view to visit the islands I was thinking about. Story wise it doesn't relate to the islands, except for one thing I'll put in that they do there, and that is to collect washed up objects or pieces of wood, which is a specific verb in Dutch: 'juttten' or 'strandjuttten'.

**J** Is that the collecting itself?

**L** The collecting of washed up things, yes. I don't know how it is now but I can imagine that before our high tech world it could have been an exciting input from the mainland. Where does this come from? This is so alien.

**J** Definitely! I grew up close to a big lake. And when I was a kid my granddad used to put wooden garbage on the rocks and he would sort of prime me, to use your words, with stories about pirate ships. He would talk about these pirates that had been active in the region a long, long time ago and then he would place stuff on the rocks in the areas where he knew me and my cousins would go to play.

**L** That's so nice! Were there treasures as well?

**J** No, it was just meant to look like material from a crashed ship. But it is a good way of capturing one's imagination. Something floats to you from the sea and you collect it.

**L** Did you also ever throw in letters in a bottle?

**J** Yeah, definitely.

**L** Ah me too. So exciting.

**J** That's interesting because the main character is a story container, like the bottle. The people on the island sort of put messages in her. And then send her to the receiver.

**L** Yeah, which takes a lot of energy. At some point she plays with the power she has. So they say that the way you say something -this includes your whole body language, facial expressions, your hand gestures, your voice- that the majority of the actual communication is done through these techniques. We are bad at listening but really good at picking up signals. The main character knows this. She is playing with it. Also by changing the order of how she is telling a story to see if there are different results. At some point, or when she is really tired at the end of the day she cannot imitate a really enthusiastic person anymore. The message becomes flatter. And then she realizes she has a lot of power there. And the sense of power -because she is trusted to do a good job- helps her rebel as well.

**J** In this project do you feel like the written story is the main thing and then the drawings, are they there to carry the story? Or are they more equal?

**L** The goal was that they would work together. And that they will take over -text and drawings have very different effects. With drawings I think you can be more suggestive, you can set moods, movement, where text is so concrete. Well honestly I don't write poetry anymore, that's different. But writing within a narrative the way I'm doing you can't hide what a sentence means when you write: 'When I picked up the mail bag I went inside and made myself a coffee.' That is what it is then. And the reader will fill in what the coffee pot looks like or what the sky is like outside depending on their own lived experience a certain image will come to mind. But the action is very concrete. While with a drawing what is happening is more, how do you say it, is less concrete. Or it depends how you look at it. Am I making sense?

**J** Yes.

**L** What I tried to do with the story on the website is to play with it. For instance I make the drawings answer a question that is asked by a character. Or when I describe a dog running across the shoreline I draw several horses running across to -to not be boring. And in this example I thought about what that means (the horses) and I think the running horses depict the feeling of the main character -the feeling of running horses across the beach without anyone riding them is like a sense of playfulness and freedom and amazement.

**This conversation has been edited.**