

*Ellen Ombre*

## AMSTERDAM: ARBEIDERSPERS

EXCERPT FROM THE NOVEL *NEGERJOOD IN MOEDERLAND*  
(*BLACK JEW IN MOTHERLAND*)

*Translated from the Dutch by Paul Vincent*

• • •

*The extract below reflects the dichotomy of Hannah's cultural background in a scene in which she has a date with Gideon, whom she met at the Zionist youth movement. While she is waiting in Café American for Gideon, an older black man sends a drink to her table - with compliments of Mr. Baldwin, the American writer. At the end of this sample translation the reader is introduced to the young man, whom Hannah will end up marrying.*

Gideon ordered rissoles and beer. She had an orange juice.

'You're rather quiet,' said Gideon, downing the steaming snack. 'I like a woman to show a bit of initiative.'

A woman? She was only just fourteen, but he didn't know, he mustn't know. Oh God, initiative, how do you do that? She stared at the table rug's pattern. Her head spun, she couldn't breathe, fought back a sigh, and thought she would faint.

Gideon told her he always drank at Café Americain. In two weeks' time he was off to Israel. He asked whether Hannah was going on holiday. She shook her head, apologized, and said she had to leave as she had forgotten an appointment. At home she crawled into bed, desperately in love.

Her mother was convinced Hannah was having a sudden flu attack. She brought her an aspirin and a hot water bottle. Hannah tucked the bottle between her thighs, braving the heat to the very last.

The following Saturday, she rushed from her job at the senior home to Americain on Leidseplein. She sat at a table near the door. In the middle of the establishment was a reading table covered with newspapers from around the world, English, French, German, Italian. The chairs were covered in red velvet, she hadn't noticed that on her first visit, and once again she was impressed with the tables with Persian rugs on them. So sumptuous! This wasn't just a bar; revolutionaries, left-wing writers and intellectuals came here. She'd read so in the paper.

She drank a cup of tea, set down a book in front of her as an excuse, and, feeling out of place, turned to her surroundings for support. Thoughts of Gideon haunted her. He was her promised land. She did not dare approach the reading table. No women sat at it.

The next Wednesday Gideon was not at Haporzim, the Zionist youth organization. She didn't like it there, and the topic, assimilation versus exile, was confusing and incomprehensible. It turned out that an assimilated person was depraved, a traitor, whereas Hannah, with Surinam in mind, had thought that assimilation was an achievement.

Someone called out that galut, exile, was the same as masochism... There was only one answer, off to Palestine and all help build the country. Hannah withdrew from the discussion. What was she supposed to say? She couldn't follow. At home she'd look up masochism in the dictionary. Fortunately no one asked her anything. Afterwards she rushed to Americain. It was virtually empty. She ordered tea. That was cheapest.

A black man was sitting by the window. He silently was staring into space. She found out it was him when the waiter brought her a drink: from Mr Baldwin, the writer. She had nodded shyly to James Baldwin. He nodded back and smiled. What was the next step? Should she go over to him, sit down at his table? What then? What was she supposed to say to an older man, her father's age, perhaps older, who was world famous? What were the rules? She peaked at him quickly. He could have been a Dankerlui. Bulging eyes. Heavy eyelids, wide mouth. A long upper lip. The colour... All the other customers were white.

The writer was observing her. She lowered her eyes so as not to seem gaudy, paid the bill, no longer daring to look in his direction. She would have liked to rush home and tell her father about Baldwin, but she could already hear her mother's voice. 'You! A young girl in a bar! You're not a bar-room floozy!...' And then the sanctions.

'I want to go to Israel, after my exams, next year,' said Hannah when she got back from the senior home, and mother asked expectantly, 'What exciting things have you learned today? Tell me!'

'To Israel? What you want to do there?' asked Mr Dankerlui, looking up from the book he was reading.

'To help build the country.'

'If you want to build a country you'd do better going to our very own Surinam.'

'Israel urgently needs young people. I can go and work in a kibbutz, as a volunteer. For three months. With grown-ups in charge.' Hannah told them everything she had learned from the senior home's director.

'As far as I'm concerned, you can go,' said her mother with virtually unprecedented warmth. 'Do you know, when I listen to you, to the stories of those old people from your senior home, I'd like to go over there myself and take a look.'

'In the home?' asked Hannah suspiciously.

'No, not there... I'm not good with old people. In the Promised Land.'

Hannah had not expected this gesture of solidarity. She was taken aback by her mother's enthusiasm, but even more by the idea of having to go to Israel with her mother. 'It strikes me as a fruitful idea,' said Mrs Dankerlui an instant later as if coming to her senses. 'It's a noble aspiration to want to help the country, the people. But what I am supposed to make of it. Look at it objectively. They'll probably have you pay for yourself.' 'It costs about three hundred guilders. The accommodation is free. You live on a kind of farm under supervision.'

'Stop,' shouted Mr Dankerlui fiercely. 'I don't like the sound of this. You'll be scarcely fifteen after your exams. A high school diploma isn't enough. You have to continue your studies, to achieve something as a woman in society. Better go on to college first.'

'You could see such a camp, because that's what it is essentially, as another kind of school,' countered Mrs Dankerlui. 'Other girls of her age work as au pairs after high

school. I don't like to see her do that. Hannah can save for the journey from her wages, can't she? We don't have to pay. She'll earn it herself.'

'For a start I don't like to see my daughter exploited by other people. What it comes down to is that you're a kind of labourer, in a work camp, even if it's only for a limited time and of your own free will.'

'Man, you're acting as if your daughter is ending up as a coolie subject to penal sanctions. Okay, so she'll be working the land. What's wrong with that?' She thundered at him: Hannah's father's reaction was 'typically black', looking down at agriculture. 'That's why Surinam didn't progress. The creoles thought they were too good for farming...'

Father lit up a cigarette, inhaled deeply and kept the smoke in his mouth for a long time, as if to extract the essence of his thoughts from the smoke. He had been displeased about Hannah's part-time job at the senior home from the outset. A domestic help. He had other plans for her. His great plans for the future had to come to fruition in this little country. Finally he exhaled and said, 'We came to Holland to do better for ourselves. Hannah must study medicine, or if need be law. Instead of wasting her time playing the Christian servant to Jews she'd do better to read books, enrich her mind and concentrate on German, which you need for the sciences.'

'Doctors,' muttered Mrs Dankerlui, 'don't mean that much these days. All they can do is prescribe medicines.'

'And as for Israel,' Mr Dankerlui went on, 'I think it's a controversial country.' 'Whatever next,' sighed her mother. 'You turn everything into a big issue these days.'

'The Zionists colonised Palestine, terrorised it and threw the inhabitants into camps. The British played a dirty political game. The Balfour Declaration promised European Zionists a homeland for Jews. That homeland was at the expense of the local population. They weren't consulted. Palestine is the British Empire's most disastrous gift to the modern world. Sooner or later we shall have to pay the price for that gift...'

[...]

'Stop pontificating. You and your everlasting politics! Man, do me a favour, for God's sake don't turn into an Eddy Bruma on me.'

Hannah's plan to go and work in a kibbutz became a daily topic of conversation. Even her brother Richenel, who even then had withdrawn from family life and camped

out in his room with the door locked, remarked that it would be good for his sister to do some scouting of that kind. 'Otherwise she'll turn into a blue stocking. And who knows, our patapouf may lose some weight from working on the land,' he added, 'and get a boyfriend.'

'She can put that right out of her head,' his mother laughed.

After months of deliberation Mr Dankerlui came round. Hannah was lying in her room one evening listening to her parents' conversation. 'Okay!' she heard him say, 'I won't make this a life or death issue. As far as I'm concerned she can go, but only if she learns the language first. Then she can get by. It's a bloody difficult language, impossible to learn at short notice. Anyway, I've bought her something. Look.'

'What a huge tome, that'll keep her busy for the time being,' said her mother. 'You must be thinking that while she's preparing she'll still be at home...'

The next day her father gave Hannah Leon Uris's *Exodus* as a present.

Hannah started Hebrew lessons with the wife of a rabbi from Buitenveldert in order to familiarise herself with the Jewish religion. She was impressed by the pious woman. The house exuded harmony, there was a smell of steeped plums, boiled chestnuts and fresh bread. The woman taught her with the patience of a saint, praising Hannah on every word she acquired. All the money she earned went on what she called her Jewish training. There was nothing left for gramophone records.

She was having a hard time at Haporzim. She felt as if she were being observed, an outsider. There was talk of the Jewish identity, and spiteful things were said about non-Jews. Someone suggested that people without a Jewish background should be excluded. 'Religious faith and origin are one.' Differences with outsiders were blown up, mutual differences brushed under the carpet. Outsiders meant everyone who was not a Jew. You were Jewish if your mother was Jewish. 'Don't be such a goy,' was a taunt. She learned. At home she looked up goy in the dictionary: non-Jew, foreigner. And she also found the meaning of matrilineal, shikse, orel... If you want to belong you have to adapt. Hannah put a dusting of Zwitsal talcum on her face. Richenel commented that it made her look just like the negative of Al Jolson. He wanted nothing to do with his sister's antics; thought what he called her Jewish flirtation ridiculous. She in turn threw the insult goy in his face.

Her father did not come up at Haporzim. And just as well too. He seemed to be moving more and more into the militant black camp, and that was hard to reconcile with Judaism. He once said that wives of Jewish slave owners were cruel, and mentioned the abuses of a certain Sarah de la Parra.

Crueller than who?' Mrs Dankerlui said that those abuses likely had been recorded by hypocritical Christians. Hannah's strive to come out as a Jewess had turned the living room into a stifling forum. She could not bear to think of someone from the association witnessing her parents' discussions. None of the members of the association ever came to her house. Home and Haporzim were separate worlds. She counted herself fortunate in her mother's origins. Without her she would never have had the chance to enrich her Jewish spirit. But she could not free herself from her father's background.

For her fifteenth birthday she asked for a Star of David. She was given a golden one, openwork, the size of a two-and-half-guilder coin. She would have liked to wear it on her coat in winter where it could be seen, so that people could place her. She became impressed by the solidarity of the young Zionists. They were like one big family. Self-confident. The chosen ones. When you were a Jew, you were somebody.

It was emphasised that in a Jewish environment, one could automatically acquire knowledge about the history of the Jews. She joined the library, saved up for books to help her progress. She read and read, but the gap in her knowledge was unbridgeable: the more she got to know about the history of the diaspora, the more she realised she knew very little, as if she were on a conveyor belt moving in the opposite direction.

Hannah was a head taller than the other members of Haporzim, and however small she tried to make herself, people looked up to her. She did a folk dancing course. The boys fought over her, and when they danced in a circle reached on tiptoe for her shoulders to lean on them heavily.

The dance teacher was critical: Hannah swivelled her hips too much. It should be more stylised: 'This is not Africa. Less bum!' Homework! At home she practised 'Hava Nagila!'. The rhythm did not fit in with the rumba at which she excelled, a South American shuffle, in which the continents of Africa, America and Europe merged into a single music. Mrs Dankerlui encouraged her to rehearse the steps separately. She demonstrated. 'That's how I learned the Charleston in the old days,' she said, leaning on

the back of a chair, while her feet moved across the floor like spastic windscreen wipers. 'If you buy a record of the music, we can practise the steps together.'

At the end of May Gideon had returned from Israel. He had been there for months. She had not seen him again since that one time in Americain. He told her about his travels, at the table where they had sat before. Hannah was distracted by the honey-brown colour of his skin, his sparkling eyes, the blond hair on his muscular arms.

He was impressed by the country, and had joined a kibbutz. He couldn't be bothered with school anymore. He was thinking about emigrating. There was only one thing he didn't like. People looked down on Arabs.

'I'd like to emigrate too,' said Hannah, quick to agree.

'You could easily be taken for an Arab, Hannah. You must bear that in mind.' He had little time. That constant looking at his watch. Hannah had hoped he would forget about time.

Three weeks after Gideon had left for the Promised Land Israel was invaded by its neighbours.

Mrs Dankerlui did not have a good word to say about Egypt, Iraq or Syria, barbarians by whom Israel was hedged in.

Hannah supported her. 'How dare they...Arab dogs,' she murmured. She had picked up the terminology at Haporzim.

Her father asked her if the meaning of 'what she had just vomited out' had gotten through to her.

Mrs Dankerlui started on about freedom of speech. 'If I weren't anaemic, I'd be giving blood today,' she said. Hannah was still too young to be a donor.

Mr Dankerlui refused all further discussion. Hannah must first come to her senses before he was prepared to talk to her.

The war lasted six days. Gideon was unhurt.

Hannah's journey to the Promised Land seemed to recede further and further. In the beginning Gideon had written to her, short letters. He wrote that he loved her, wanted her. In Hebrew, their secret language. The rabbi's wife helped her translate, eyes glistening, and enjoyed the romance vicariously. Gideon had become a convinced kibbutznik. After the Six-Day War his language became militant. The Palestians should

bugger off and knock on the doors of their Arab brothers. Israel was the home of the Jews and no one else.

Hannah hoped she would not be taken for an Arab woman in Israel. She yearned for love letters, not for the unromantic political diatribes that Gideon wrote in Dutch. Gradually the letters became scarcer. She longed for him, was consumed with desire, threw herself into Hebrew.

She had to pay the association three hundred guilders to cover the cost of a three-month stay in Israel. After two years of working she had been able to put aside half that amount. Then her mother decided overnight that she must pay for her keep and henceforth must buy her own clothes.

‘Why?’ asked Hannah.

‘Because,’ replied Mrs Dankerlui sternly.

‘I’ll never get to Israel like this.’

‘Where there’s a will there’s a way,’ said her mother nonchalantly.

Hannah had gained a place at high school. She was an excellent student and was in her last year. The wages at Beth Shalva had remained the same. The rent was raised by two and a half guilders.

One Wednesday afternoon the telephone went. Hannah was in her room studying. At three o’clock she was due to go to Haporzim, report there and then as usual set off for Americain to indulge her daydreams.

‘Hannah!’ Mrs Dankerlui sounded alarmed. ‘There’s a man on the telephone for you.’

‘I’ve got to speak to you urgently,’ said Gideon.

Hannah was speechless. She hadn’t heard a word from Gideon for ages. She pulled herself together, and just for something to say asked if it was something serious. He couldn’t say over the phone.

Mrs Dankerlui looked on frowning while her daughter telephoned. ‘Who is it?’ she whispered.

‘Someone from Haporzim,’ replied Hannah with her hand over the mouthpiece.

‘What does he want?’

‘I’ve got to hang up, Gideon,’ said Hannah. ‘See you later, at Haporzim.’



‘At the gate of the Rijksmuseum, next to the entrance,’ said Gideon hurriedly, ‘at two o’clock. Not at the association!’

Hannah rang off.

‘Odd conversation. I thought that only young people were members of that club. That wasn’t a boy’s voice, it was the bass of a full-grown man.’

‘It was one of the leaders. We’ve got to be there on time. He had to pass on the message.’

‘It runs until five o’clock, doesn’t it?’ asked Mrs Dankerlui suspiciously. ‘I want you back by a quarter to six on the dot.’

Mrs Dankerlui did not know that Hannah seldom went to the association any more. She turned up only to provide herself with an alibi and left shortly afterwards. She paid her membership fee. But the time intended for the club, the time she had gained, she spent in Americain, submerged in anonymity. Whenever possible at that special table where she had sat for the first time with Gideon.

Once her eye was caught by *EBONY* in the kiosk at Americain. She was struck by the photo of three confident, carefully coiffed, sexy women on the cover and read: Surinam Multiracial Paradise at the Crossroads. She bought the magazine. In the bus home she read the article. The writer had never encountered such a multiracial society. Hannah looked at the colour photos of people who made up the Surinamese population: blacks, Hindus, Javanese, Chinese, creoles, moksi’s. She observed her fellow-passengers in their grey winter clothing. She fell into a trance of homesickness. When she got off she realised she had left the magazine on the bus. At home she crawled into bed, her consolation, and that afternoon she skipped Hebrew class. The lessons had been getting nowhere recently. She felt sorry for the rabbi’s wife. In the space of two years she had had three children, including a pair of twins. She now had nine of them. She looked tired, pitiable. One of her canine teeth was missing. Her shapeless grey wig was too large for her pale sunken face. The house smelled musty. The woman was no longer a model, and orthodoxy began to repel Hannah. This atavistic religion was diametrically opposed to the age she was living in, the 1960s.

Gideon’s phone call threw Hannah into uncertainty. Time had diluted her yearning for him. Now he turned up again. Eretz Israel!

He suggested going for a walk. He put a hand on her shoulder and led her in the direction of Vondelpark. He was breathing slightly heavily, as if climbing a mountain. He looked different, burdened. 'I've got to tell you something,' he said, stroking her shoulder. 'I've got to get married.'

'That's impossible. I'm far too young,' replied Hannah in embarrassment.

'Not to you...'

Hannah stopped, stepped away from him.

'It's someone from the kibbutz.' Hannah felt her stomach contracting. She could not utter a word.

'Ruth is pregnant. We only made love once. I swear.' He didn't really love her. She refused an abortion... He had been put on the spot, felt responsible.

The tip of Hannah's heavy tongue probed the chambers of her heart that was going haywire. Her search produced: 'How old is she?'

'Twenty-eight. I'm nineteen, if that's what you mean. Hannah, I love you. I always have. But you're so remote...'

The first thing that occurred to Hannah was: my fault. I'm hard to get through to. Immediately afterwards: what did I do wrong?

'Hannah!' Gideon grabbed her shoulders. 'Hold me. Kiss me. I've never kissed a black girl... I want to go to bed with you...' Hannah tore herself free, looked at Gideon with disgust and heard herself say, 'Get lost!' She turned on her heels, out of the park, towards Leidseplein. On the way she tore the Star of David from her neck and hurled it into the bushes, chain and all.

She went into Americain. In search of solace she hoped to find James Baldwin. He had seen her sitting there, offered her a drink without asking anything in return. Even if he did not offer her anything she would go over to him, she'd be open not remote, though she did not know exactly how.

She ordered an Irish coffee. Baldwin wasn't there. She was overcome by loneliness, and lazily licked the dripping cream from the glass. The hot alcohol dulled her senses. She would never set foot in Hapozim again. The only person she had felt an affinity with was Gideon. He liked blues, jazz, dressed in black. He was part of the city scene... But he had betrayed her. 'Never kissed a black girl!' He could not have made it clearer that he belonged to a different breed. She would never go back to Hebrew class,

to that woman in her moth-eaten wig. If *she* ever wore a wig it would be in the style of Tina Turner or Aretha Franklin!

She was startled when a man, resting his hands on the table, leaned over to her. He was wearing a short leather jacket with the collar turned up. Her first thought was: Mick Jagger. He looked like him. Thick, pouting lips, piercing blue eyes, curly hair hanging halfway down his shoulders.

‘Is it good?’ he said in a low voice. He sat down opposite her. ‘Shit, you’re gorgeous. Drop-dead gorgeous! You’d think God exists. What’s your name...? Where have you been all my life?’ He gave her a penetrating look, took hold of her hand that lay limply on the table and said softly, ‘You’re waiting for me, true or false?’ Hannah’s body reacted violently at that moment, which might be decisive for the rest of her life. She ran a timid glance over him. There were two buttons missing from his jacket. His unmanicured nails marked him as someone who neglected himself. She trembled at the thought that this man opposite her might not be the man she was waiting for, but was certainly all she was going to get. Chaim.

---

"Flarden" by Ellen Ombre.

Copyright © 2004 by Ellen Ombre.

Originally published by De Arbeiderspers.

Reprinted by permission of the author, and Paul Vincent, the translator.

# Calabash

A JOURNAL OF CARIBBEAN ARTS AND LETTERS

Volume 4, Number 1 / Spring-Summer 2006

## Information about this work:

---

*AMSTERDAM*

**By:** Ellen Ombre

**Start Page:** 123

**URL:** <http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/vol4no1/0401123.pdf>

---

*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

*Calabash* is published by New York University. Please contact the publisher for further permissions regarding the use of this work. Publisher information may be obtained at:

**<http://www.nyu.edu/calabash/about.html>**

*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*

© 2006 New York University