

JOACHIM FRANK

AAN ZEE

A NOVEL

**UNIVERSITY PRESS
OF THE SOUTH**

2019

Copyright 2019 by Joachim Frank.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Publisher.

Published in the United States by:

University Press of the South
New Orleans, LA 70119 USA

E-mail: unprsouth@aol.com

Visit our award-winning web pages: www.unprsouth.com

www.punouveaumonde.com

Acid-Free Paper.

Joachim Frank.

Aan Zee. A Novel.

292 pages.

Cover Art: 'Aan Zee' by Isaac Israels (1865-1934) (Scheveningen Museum, The Netherlands). Cover Design by Ana María Calatayud.

1. Literature. 2. Novel. 3. Modern *Bildungsroman*. 4. Twentieth Century. 5. The Netherlands. 6. Austria. 7. Fluid Dynamics. 8. Academia. 9. 2017 Nobel Prize Winner. 10. Joachim Frank.

ISBN: 978-1-937030-79-7 (USA)
2019

ISBN: 978-9-403638-12-6 (EUROPE)
2021

In Memoriam Sparkle Beauty

CHAPTER 1

"No wise man can tie water into a knot on the edges of his garment/ No sage knows the number of grains of sand on earth"

-- from *Ifa Divination Poetry*

As he was operating the xerox machine, Hubert stared out of the window of the library onto a pompous landscape made of marble. The architecture -- monolithic, posturing, enduring -- was Hitler's unacknowledged redemption in the very country that had fought him to death. Young students with bleached sneakers crossed the plaza. In the absence of a breeze, the flag on the big pole was tired; the stars and stripes were jumbled up and half-hidden in the folds of the fabric.

Hubert copied a page of the International Science Citation Index. It listed the citations of his own work by other scientists: an entire page-long column in the finest print. He received great satisfaction from seeing his work acknowledged; the heaviness of these orange-colored volumes seemed to signify the profound mark he had left in the history of human endeavor. Studying the page he had just copied, he was quite startled to realize that the Belovski, H. listed there was, in

reality, the composite of four scientists, only one of whom was himself. The decision of the publishers to list initials rather than first names for economy had thrown together the scientific output of four Belovskis who were probably at odds with one another in all imaginable attributes, such as hairstyle, age, and habitat. What was worse, every trace of gender was lost, and the initial H. had become a fountain of two streams of speculations sharply divided by the sex of their bearers: namely one including all those dull co-Huberts, Herberts, Henrys, and Hanks and the other one sparkling with Henriettas, Heathers, Hildegards, and Helgas.

The first H. Belovski, in neurophysiology, had jumped onto the stage sometime in 1963. There was a seemingly timid H. Belovski in the field of agriculture who had launched a paper in 1967 on the use of pesticides in the Finger Lakes, which was widely cited for a brief period but then disappeared into oblivion. Meanwhile, the neuro-physiological Belovski had gathered quite a following, as witnessed by twenty-odd papers in reputable journals, until, presumably, a high administrative position separated him from his coauthors' quest for truth. He might have become a functionary in some professional society, administrator of grant monies, co-editor of journals with names that had a pregnant sound to them, such as *Nerve*, *Soul*, *Self*, or *Applied Conscience*.

During the decline of the second Belovski's scientific output, H. Belovski proper stepped in, the one whose H. stood for "Hubert." At once, he recognized his papers in the physics of turbulence, and his first article was entitled "The Birth of a Twister." He was one of those scientists of whom it is said that they are spending their life proving their Ph.D. thesis right, and the birth of the twister gave rise to many afterbirths in papers, letters to the editor, abstracts, and reviews, finally to be crowned by a monograph on "A Twister's Sudden Birth," subtitled "The Onset of Turbulent Phenomena in Meteorology." The book was a phenomenal flop; it earned him exactly \$324.50 in royalties before it disappeared from the bookshelves for good.

The fourth H. Belovski was a curious fellow who dwelled on organic compounds. He worked himself up from two-ring compounds to those with three and five and then landed himself safely in the lap of a pharmaceutical company.

What Hubert had never hoped to accomplish in his lifetime materialized in front of his eyes: here was the true genius H. Belovski, beloved scholar of arts and letters, equally accomplished in fields as widely separated as the science of the grain and the science of the brain. The Science Citation Index had created a universal mind bearing his very own name. Coming centuries, unable to grasp the subtleties of citation

listings in the twentieth century and the obliterating need for economy, would rank him with none less than Leonardo da Vinci.

He had the sensation of standing in an enormous cathedral and feeling dwarfed by the columns and beams of light coming in from the windows; in reality, he was a nothing, a speck of dust that was barely visible and could be blown away by the whisper of a prayer.

"Operator, operator, out of paper," the machine screamed.

A red light started flashing, demanding attendance by an unspecified operator, much like a little boy who gets in trouble and calls his mother by her generic name. Hubert pressed a button to activate a tiny bell that was used on this occasion. Anticipating the approach of benevolently smiling library personnel, he hastily hid the traces of his self-indulgence under one of the heavy volumes. When the motherly figure of the senior duplication technician arrived, Hubert found himself unequipped to answer the question he was sure to be asked: what kind of business had caused the machine to run out of paper, and since he evidently cared enough to wait, what other copy-worthy material was still to follow? However, instead of starting such inquiries, she simply smiled under her silver-chained, silver-plated glasses, and said, "Hi," with the open-

hearted sympathy of a compatriot of letters. Paper was added, and no questions were asked, but the "Hi" reverberated in his mind because it had the inviting ring of a family gathering to it. That "Hi" was inviting and expectant and somehow Shakespearean in that it seemed to project all persons irrespective of their professions, creeds, or classes -- beggars and kings alike -- onto the same stage of humanity. On that stage, they might all sit in soft easy chairs by a fireplace and turn pages of voluminous novels, only clearing their throats intermittently to give each other comforting signals of the I'm-here-are-you-also-here? sort. There would be the fine tingling sounds of her silver chain. In that world, there was no hunger, no thirst, no itching; just boundless harmony between cerebral and bodily existence.

CHAPTER 2

The Big Bang -- matter freeing itself from its timeless existence in singularity, expanding in centrifugal motion, exploding into the new (unheard of) dimensions of time and space -- produced gravity and force fields and interactions that reached far into the cold, empty space, differentiating, clustering into stable states, condensing, condensing, creating conditions for complex systems to form -- temporarily, at least -- that were able to replicate and pass on their acquired sophistication over generations and to accommodate to the hardships of the emptiness around and the hostility of matter not so organized: living, organic matter -- to come to the point: slime molds, baker's yeast, white radishes, purple snails, and angora rabbits -- and some unknown force pushed some of these temporary organic beings ahead of others, creating humans -- violent animals with brains to argue and boss everyone else around -- and specifically, after many trials and errors over thousands of years and after many successes at creating non-Huberts, finally created Hubert Belovski, the one who felt the centrifugal pull (a red-shift within himself) every night when he lay awake in his bed made of wood (dead flesh of his green fellow plants!) and listened to the shrill comforting

sounds of the cicadas (living flesh of his antennae-bearing sensitive and sentimental fellow souls!).

And in the grand picture that presented itself to Hubert for a fleeting moment, it seemed odd that he didn't spend every living second rejoicing over the unique path of fate that had brought him into existence. Instead, circumstances had forced him to work, and the particular work he had chosen for himself was to study the swirls, funnels, and maelstroms in which nonorganic but nevertheless fellow matter (air and clouds and dust) preferred to move around in the atmosphere.

A cosmic joke?

CHAPTER 3

Hubert drove home in his Corolla after a long day at work. His house stood on the little hill like an ancient castle. This was an absurd idea considering it was made of wood, colonial style, with the two Doric columns as the only references to a time long past. But the house was stately in some way and had a quietness about it, a solemnity that extended to the trees and the small formal flowerbed in the front and to the unceremonious driveway. The houses next to his were plain, though they were busy with life and the laughter of young children.

It seemed to him he had spent centuries hauling garbage cans back and forth every Monday. There had been a time when the backyard garden, now defunct, had expanded under his hands. It had rewarded him for the love he had invested in zucchinis and tomatoes, but it had also taught him bitter lessons about the cauliflower (mildew-prone and retarded!), the radish (wooden and worm-riddled like antique bedknobs!), and the always unreliable onion.

Every day lately when he returned from work and approached his house, he felt a force clasp him, tightening around his chest. His breathing became shallow as he

anticipated the emptiness behind the door. Now, as he opened the door, the way the sound echoed inside the house spoke of the solitude he faced again in the coming night. But as he entered, he saw Sunshine's big brown eyes. They expected him but also mirrored his loneliness. His cat was a solitary, hypochondriac tabby, one of the many possessions Karen had left behind on a November day three years before. Sunshine peed into his boots occasionally, an incorrigible trace of abuse by former owners, but Hubert took these episodes with understanding (nobody's perfect). Besides, his feet produced an odor that could reasonably get a cat confused about the purpose of the two smelly containers.

Sometimes he thought of Sunshine as a permanent witness. Those eyes had calmly watched the scenes of newfound love years ago, when they had chased each other naked through the house from one mirror to the next until they had settled in the downstairs closet for a dusty embrace. The cat had witnessed the times of long breakfasts, with Karen and Hubert draped in Japanese *happi* coats, reading the *New York Times*, listening to the sounds of the Brandenburg Concerti. Then, three years ago, when the fights started, Sunshine had watched the strange goings-on from a safe distance, as it was her turn to be in the closet, to avoid physical harm.

So, whenever he looked into Sunshine's eyes, Hubert

couldn't help reading his own past, curiously distorted through a lens that presumably transformed steaks into mice and Scotch into catnip. There could be some kind of empathy: Hey, old man, we've been through a lot! But those eyes could also be telling him a nagging I-told-you-so. Finally, since Sunshine had seen goings-on before Hubert had come onto the scene, he was tempted to read more: about past lovers and mysterious nocturnal things a cat might have in common with a woman.

Hubert made himself at home. Followed by the tapping of the cat's overlong nails on the hardwood floor, he picked up the mail, walked into the living room, and put his Art Blakey record on. In the kitchen, he opened a can of tuna -- how easy it was to keep an animal happy! -- and poured himself a gin and tonic. The mail was an assortment of requests for attention and support: Sane Freeze, National Backyard Society, Guns Kill People. Besides, the water bill was there, and a catalog for Macy's intimate apparel. There were new, original misspellings of his name: Belivski, Beloovsky, and -- he loved it! -- simply Mr. Bell. It was all worth three minutes of attention.

Anticipating the barrenness and anonymity of his mail, he had brought a letter home from work, the day's pleasant surprise. It was addressed to him by a Dr. Schivenhagen from the University of Leiden, in the Netherlands. He unfolded it

now to read it again:

Dear Dr. Bolovski:

We are organizing the Twenty-First International Congress on Fluid Dynamics, to be held July 10–15 in The Hague. On behalf of the Scientific Programme Committee, it is my pleasure to invite you to give a presentation on the subject of "The Onset of Critical Conditions in Hydrodynamic Flow." Due to sizable donations from industry, we will be able to pay your registration, hotel accommodation, as well as your economy-class APEX fare. Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you are able to accept this invitation.

I hope to see you in The Hague.

Sincerely,

Dr. Egbert Schivenhagen

Hubert anticipated the trip with excitement. It was less than three months away. Europe was this crammed old world of infinite complexity, a coffee house full of strange foreign voices, full of dissonances, yet, oddly enough, a house where everybody knew his place. In the center of it was the piece of

Germany that had been his home, surrounded by well-wishing yet suspicious neighbors. It was still possible to get a rude welcome when speaking German in Holland, and in a way, Hubert felt that by speaking English, he'd enter that country in a masquerade, a wolf in a sheep's clothing, and thereby avoid the unpleasantness stirred up by the past. But he had been less than two years old when the Germans had invaded the Netherlands, and it would be easy to explain that underneath his clothing, there was yet another lamb.

Because there was the other Europe of hope, the increasingly happy intermingling of voices, the sophisticated fabric of urban civilization. There was even the newly relaxed demeanor of custom officers – traditionally, the barking phalanx of national pride. It was this new land he couldn't wait to see again. But there was also the thrill of traveling, of chance encounters, of new possibilities to redefine his life. He watched himself in the mirror for promises that might be written on his face: Intellectual depth? Affection? Sophistication in lovemaking? Those were all qualities he claimed to possess. Or was it a face that would cause its bearer to be dismissed as superficial, uninviting, boring, just because of mistakes in the mechanisms of countenance? He tried out some of his facial muscles and immediately disapproved of what he saw: a strange succession of grins.

The telephone rang; it was his friend Eric.

"Up for a beer?"

"Sure bet."

* * *

Eric, originally among Karen's circle of friends -- his nickname was "the Bear" -- had stuck to Hubert when the times had gotten tough. He was Irish, blue-eyed and red-haired, with the fierce temperament of his breed, but confined to a wheelchair since the age of twelve due to an accident he refused to discuss. Because of the energy visibly brewing in his friend, Hubert thought of him as an eagle in misfortune, with wings clipped. He lived with his sister in the suburbs.

When Hubert entered The Fountain, he immediately spotted Eric at the round table, half-leaning out of his shiny contraption, finishing his beer. Before him on the table was a yellow plastic bag and another empty mug.

"Hey, what's up," Eric said, giving him the upside-down handshake that had gone out of fashion some time ago. For a moment, the arms of the two friends zigzagged out of sync.

"Nothing much," Hubert said. "Except I got invited."

"Invited where? I hope it's not somewhere in Kansas again."

"Kansas? God, no! No, it's big this time. The

Netherlands."

"Lucky bastard! Will you get to see more of Europe?"

"I don't know. Germany, perhaps. And I've got this Aunt in Tyrol."

"Tyrol is in...let me guess...Austria?"

"Yes, Austria. It borders Italy. Up north from there."

Hubert turned around to look for the waitress. When she appeared two tables farther down, he signaled her. Turning back to Eric, he said, "What's going on with you? Anything new?"

"I'm fine."

"But something is the matter. There's something I see in your face."

"I guess there is. She drives me nuts."

"Who? Your sister? What happened this time?"

Instead of answering, Eric directed his eyes past Hubert's shoulder. Lynn, the waitress with the crew cut appeared and put her hand affectionately on Hubert's arm. Her lips were painted black, and her face was unusually white. Her mouth looked as if she had eaten charcoal. What was left of her hair was blonde. Hubert, a regular in the bar since his divorce, had followed Lynn's transformation over the years from a country girl to a modish punk; her wonderful lips had been covered first with nothing, then pink, then a bright red, then mahogany

before turning into the color of nothingness, of death. What could be next? The visible spectrum was clearly exhausted, and one day soon, her lips might only be appreciated through an Army infrared telescope.

"Hi, Bert! How've you been? Long time no see."

Hubert smiled and gave her a quick tap on her waist with his flat hand. Perhaps it was on account of the synthetic look of her face that he found himself surprised her body still felt warm underneath.

"Hi, Lynn, good to see you," he said. "A beer for me and another for the Bear."

"A beer for Bert and a beer for the Bear," Lynn repeated cheerfully as she headed for the bar. Her voice was always a pleasant surprise: it was the only thing that had not changed.

"Neat girl," Eric said, "despite everything."

"Yeah. A shame, though," Hubert said, sighing. "But back to you. You were saying ...?"

"About Jane. She's got a boyfriend, you know..."

"Your sister has a boyfriend? You never told me that."

"Well, she does. It was never serious before, but now the thing is, they don't have a place to go. He's married."

"You mean she doesn't want to bring him back to her own home?" Hubert said. "I think that's silly."

"That's what I keep telling her. I'm telling her, I've got

my own bathroom, and we are grownups, for Christ's sake."

"But that's her problem, right? What is yours?"

"Well, I think she's resenting the whole deal about living with me. At least, that's what I think is going on. It comes out in all kinds of petty things."

"Like what?"

"Like I have my working stuff in the living room. It takes me ages to get organized each time, so I leave everything out: the accounting sheets, the dictionaries, the manuscript, the books I borrow. Stuff like that. And for her, the whole place is a disaster area, like...the result of cluster bombing. She says it makes her sick. So, what do I do? Abandon my projects?"

"You know what you need?" Hubert said, leaning toward his friend. "You need some time away from this place. You know, I thought about that. Do you want to meet me in Vienna after the conference? We could do things together. I could push you up the Alps. Seriously!"

"Are you crazy? First of all, think about the cost. Second, you don't know what you'd be getting into. In Europe, you have to travel miles to find a public toilet to fit a wheelchair in."

"We'll get around. And you could get a charter. Think about it."

There was an awkward silence. Hubert found himself

staring at the bulging plastic bag. "What's in there? I meant to ask you."

Eric opened the bag, imitating the sound of a fanfare, and produced a green thing somewhat bigger than a grapefruit, which he placed in the middle of the table. It was clearly a vegetable, but sculpted like a human head. The way it was placed, its green eyes looked firmly at Hubert.

"Aha!" Hubert exclaimed. "A first success with your green monster project?"

"It's going OK," Eric said. "I think I can even start to think about production."

"Holy shit!" The waitress, arriving with the beer, emitted a shriek. "What on earth is that?"

"It's Eric's idea of making money in a big way," Hubert said.

"But it's freaking unreal," she said. "I mean..."

"Ok, I'll tell you," Eric said. "It's simply a gourd grown in a mold."

"They grow on vines," Hubert explained.

"A gourd grown in a mold. A gourd grown in a mold?" she said as she looked up to the ceiling. "You mean you've got some kind of form that makes this veggie take on Lincoln's face?"

"Yup, that's right. Some kind of form," Eric said. "Any

face you like."

"Greta Garbo and Elvis as vegetables? Big money? Give me a break!" She laughed as she walked off, shaking her head even more than her hips.

When she was out of hearing range, Eric leaned over toward his friend. "I was going to ask you. Do you have another five grand to invest?"

"Wait a minute," Hubert replied. He suddenly realized that he might have been called to the bar for his money, not for his companionship. He quickly dismissed the unsettling idea: friends should be able to make demands without running the risk of such petty accounting.

"Last time you told me you have everything you need," he said. "The seeds, the tiller, a basic set of molds..."

"Rumpelstiltskin, Bambi, Superman, Abe Lincoln," Eric interjected.

"You've got two acres, irrigation pipes, and Stewart. He's still in on it, isn't he?"

"Sure bet," Eric replied. "My Homo faber. He'll run it. He knows what he is doing."

"So, what's the five grand for?"

"We need pumps and valves. For the irrigation system. The pumps are run by electric switches, so when everything is rigged up, I can run the whole thing from my desk. Well, more

or less. I'll have Stewart only one day a week once things are set up."

"Eric, are you sure this isn't a bottomless pit? I can spare another five grand all right, but I want to be sure I get it back. I want you to be careful."

"Ten back for the five, ten for the other five. It'll work out just as I promised. You'll see. No sweat. I showed this thing around. Got everybody excited. I got a letter from the president of the Massachusetts Pet Plant Association. Think about it: combo bands...home decorations...the entire Halloween business..."

Eric interrupted himself as Lynn reappeared, and ordered another round of beer. Hubert admired him for his resilience, his humor, his imagination. And there was more; talking with him brought his own problems into perspective: Karen had left him, and before Karen, Helga, the woman he had once thought he couldn't live without -- big deal, there were men such as Eric with no Karens nor Helgas in their lives. Instead, all their mental energy went into maintaining a precarious balance: they needed a powerful fantasy to offset the forces of immobility. The sculpted gourds -- fantastic as they were, successful or not as a commercial venture -- would contribute to Eric's spiritual survival. In some way, the idea with the gourds was a phallic dream, a dream of swelling, filling, giving life, impressing

one's form on unformed substance. By filling the molds, Eric would fill the world with his presence; he would finally overcome the constraints of his condition. Like a tree that produces wind-borne seeds, he'd send out messengers who would travel for him and testify to his ingenuity, strength, and prolific energy wherever they would go.

"What is it doing for you, the conference invitation?" Eric asked, breaking the silence. "I mean, scientifically."

"I don't know. I suppose it's good, I mean, some recognition for me working my ass off."

"Well, isn't this something? You don't seem to be that excited."

This was the question Hubert had been waiting for; he needed someone who would ask this question, and he felt a rush of gratitude toward Eric when he spoke. He started telling him about his feeling of utter insignificance in the library a few hours before, his sense of uselessness in a world where not even his name was unique, not to speak of his role.

"Suppose I dropped dead right now," Hubert said.

"Not here," Eric said. "Don't do that to me."

"No." Hubert protested with his outstretched hand against the intrusion of sarcasm. "I mean, what would be left of me other than the records of my utility bills? Can you think of something?"

"Well, let me think. You showed me some papers you wrote. You were quite proud of those."

"They are by a certain Belovski comma H. That could have been any number of people."

"What about memories of people close to you? Even those who have been close at one time or other. Nothing of this is lost."

"Memories! They'll be gone someday," Hubert said, his face cradled between his two hands.

"Listen, on that scale, nothing will be left. One day, only a few hundred million years from now, our sun will expand to the size of the solar system, and every fucking copy of the Britannica will be reduced to ashes."

"You've really cheered me up today. Good try!" Hubert said. "Besides, I have done without the Britannica all my life."

* * *

Back at home, Hubert spent a good part of the night writing in his journal. Sunshine lay curled up next to his chair.

*I have spent my life shaking other people's hands.
There are all kinds of hands and many kinds of shakes:
the ones that melt in your hand like pizza dough, the*

ones that take on unpredictable errands in circles, spirals, and zigzags, and the kind that is to the point, bringing together firmly the sinews and bones for a cordial moment, but with a movement that carries with it a determination to sever the link as soon as it can be arranged.

The German custom brings hands together promiscuously, incessantly. I shook my father's hand every morning when he came down into the kitchen. I hated greeting one of my best friends because he was elusive in his shake; his hands would change shape, even rearrange bones and flesh, much like the way amoebae crawl, to melt away in my grip even before I could say hi. But it had to be done.

(Customs: habits that go unrecognized, uncommented in the area they rule. One has to leave the Teutonic Reich in order to share the sense of wonder about this constant business of touching.)

Recently, I found out something about the shake, first hand, so to speak. It happened one night when I tried out all kinds of things I might have done once as a toddler. (Why? Being alone makes you ageless; you don't have to profess to the way you look to someone else; you have no role to play; you are little more than a

box filled with sensuous memories.) I licked my knee, pulled one of my big toes toward my forehead, and tried to let my elbows touch each other behind my back. This sounds crazy, but I suppose I was driven by curiosity and challenged by the sheer multitude of possibilities. Perhaps one could call it some sort of workout, except that it didn't require a contraption for \$49.99, nor a switch to a new philosophy. Toward the end of my first permutational exercise, when my joints were beginning to hurt and fatigue was setting in, just then, when I was about to stop, my right hand ran playfully into its mirror twin. That is the moment I wish to talk about.

Each recognized some kind of sameness in the other: touch reciprocated, warmth felt, and the same degree of topological complexity -- fingeriness for lack of a better word. Yet there was also an instant feeling of transgression, as in an act of incest. Could it be that the Church, in its long fight for purity, has come up with the idea of folding the hands so as to order and tame the urges of self-exploration? I still don't know this. What I do know is that in the first consciously secular clasping touch of my hands, there was speechlessness, boundless surprise.

What happened next? After a second or so, my

right hand remembered that something was missing. It inserted the movement of a shake into the resting pose the way Fellini slips a Bergmann scene into his films: as a jesting quotation, given with a winking eye.

My left hand followed reluctantly, like a woman on the dance floor who doesn't want to be led by the man who courts her, either because she is strong-willed or because she hasn't made up her mind. And in this way, my first handshake with myself developed, my hands embracing each other with the curiosity and shame of lovers in a public square.

