

If you're like many people, you know about Theo Jansen already. You may not *know* you know, but on reflection perhaps you realize you do. You've come across his kinetic sculptures in videos online, or a kid has shown the videos to you, or you've been with friends who were watching them. Once seen, they are remembered. Theo Jansen is a Dutch artist who lives in Delft, near the North Sea. He could almost be a single-name artist, because everybody calls him Theo, pronounced "Tayo." For the past twenty-one years, Theo has devoted himself to constructing animals that can walk on the beach powered only by the wind.

His name for his animals is Strandbeests, which means "beach animals" in Dutch. The first time I saw them, I was in a restaurant in Manhattan having lunch with friends and somebody brought out a laptop and we watched and re-watched them. The creatures were many-legged, they seemed as at home on a beach as sandpipers or crabs, they high-stepped with the vivacity of colts, they fit perfectly next to the waves and sky. Some had batwing-like sails, one was made of plywood, but basically they were accumulations of stiff plastic tubes. To see inanimate stuff come to life that way was wild, shiver-inducing—like seeing a haystack do the Macarena.

At this lunch, people said how great it would be if the Strandbeests came to New York. And they might, because Robert Kloos, the director for Visual Arts, Architecture, and Design at the Consulate General of the Netherlands, has been working with other fans of Theo's to find a venue and funding for a show in the city in 2013, and has described such a show as "a dream come true." The photographer Lena Herzog, one of Theo's fans, who was at the lunch, said the show would draw a big audience, because a commercial for BMW cars featuring Theo and his Strandbeests had already received more than four million hits on YouTube. Then she told me that Theo would be bringing out some new Strandbeests for a trial run, or walk, on a beach near Delft very soon, that she would be going over to photograph them, and that I should come along. I thought this was a good idea. Before the Strandbeests appeared here, I would see them in their native environment.

So in mid-May I went, and Theo himself met me at the airport in Amster-

LADY DUFFERIN'S TERRACE

In the old Viceregal lodge silk paisley and damask on the walls,
Rosewood staircase skittish on damp rock.

Rajahs stopped to water their horses, British armies dithered in heat,
Cattle crept uphill.

On unequal ground the shadow of wings—
Restless calligraphy.

Afternoons I go downhill in search of bottled water
And Britannia biscuits.

When I was a child ayah gave me biscuits to dip in tea
In a house with a mango grove not far from the sea.

Beauty swallows us whole.
I try to imagine your face without stubble on it.

In Boileauganj market I step into a pothole—
It's filled with shining water,

Desire makes ghosts of us.
Earthworms glisten in papaya peel

dam, holding a hand-lettered sign with my name on it at the customs exit. (Lena would be joining us in a day or two.) He greeted me warmly and we wandered off. At first, he couldn't find his white Volvo in the airport parking garage, and I set down my suitcase while he listened for his dog. Theo has a small, wool-colored dog of a French Madagascar breed who goes almost everywhere with him and is named Murphy. In a minute, he picked up Murphy's bark and we homed in on it. The dog barked more encouragingly the closer we got to the car.

A drive of about forty minutes brought us to Theo's outdoor workshop, on a man-made hill in the suburb of Ypenburg, near Delft. The hill is on land that used to be a military airport, and serves as a sound barrier between a highway on one side and apartment houses on the other. A sort of no man's zone, it remains mostly unoccupied, so local officials let Theo use it to assemble and store his Strandbeests. The yellow PVC tubing the animals are made of bleaches to bone white in the sun; wrecks of defunct Strandbeests lay in the hilltop grass like heaps of old bones. A few

newer, ready-to-travel models stood in a line next to the storage container where Theo keeps thirty miles of plastic tubes for future use. Others of his more recent animals were absent, returning from an exhibition in Japan.

Theo is sixty-three. His collar-length white hair frames his head like two S shapes facing each other, his eyes are china blue, and he has a wide, guileless smile. That he is handsome contributes to the success of his videos. When he is working, and at other times, he wears a well-tailored purple corduroy jacket narrow at the waist and flared below. His jacket, unrestrained hair, long legs, and antic energy often give him the look of a storybook sorcerer. He is somewhat deaf—the result, he says, of spending so much of his forties hanging next to the loud engines of the para-planes he loved to fly in many places, but mainly over the North Sea coastline. His country's famous landscape, intensely cultivated and flat as water, floors a vast column of cloud-filled sky, and the image of a younger Theo careening around up there in his sketchy flying machines somehow still is part of him.

Merchants squat in wooden shops
Hawking hair oil and liver pills.

A lorry with a blue god rattles past.
Krishna's right hand

Is stretched in benediction.
His eye, bruised.

Come twilight I sip cold water,
Stretch out on a chaise longue,

I am distracted by monkeys
Clawing stone pineapples on Lady Dufferin's terrace.

A cloud floats down, covering us all.
I turn on an oil lamp and write to you:

Dear X—Where are you?
In the mess on Observatory Hill

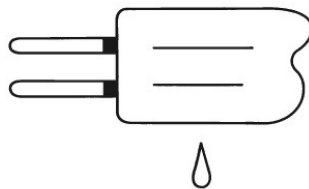
They serve us rice, dal, and sliced onions.
Also green chilis, the color of parrot wings.

—Meena Alexander

In fact, Theo's first important work was a sky piece. In 1980, he made a flying saucer from plastic sheeting on a light frame. The saucer was lens-shaped, about fifteen feet across, and carried beneath it a plastic paint bucket that emitted outer-space-like beeps. One afternoon, he and some friends filled the flying saucer with helium and launched it over Delft. Immediately, a local sensation resembling the "War of the Worlds" episode (if less frantic and more civilized) ensued. The object he had made looked and behaved as a flying saucer is expected to. It hovered, rose, darted (with the wind), went in and out of clouds. The police gave chase, people ran from their houses to look up, authorities reported that the object was moving at great speeds, it was said to be as big as a nuclear reactor, etc.—all satisfying developments, from Theo's point of view. After exciting the population and inscribing in thousands of memories its flight through the spacious skies of Delft, the saucer vanished in the direction of Belgium. When the author of the event was revealed, he got a lot of press. The experience ruined him, he says, for the land-

scape paintings he had been doing before.

I was thinking it must be strange for a landscape painter to live in a landscape that was fixed in oil and ratified permanently by the great Dutch painters of the seventeenth century. From Theo's man-made hilltop, for example, I could see several familiar-looking towers, including the fifteenth-century church steeple that appears in Vermeer's "View of Delft" (1660). I could also see a small flock of storks flapping to the horizon, and a canal lined with possibly invasive reeds, and blunt-faced trucks on the highway, and red rooftops, and rows of thin, dark trees like sawteeth. The only other structure as tall as the old steeple or the towers was the two poles holding up the golden arches of a McDonald's restaurant. With binoculars, I might have picked out the crows



and ravens that throng around the sign and descend on the garbage cans in the McDonald's parking lot. My hotel was near the McDonald's, it turned out, and I observed the birds close up later.

Theo showed me around his small on-site workshop. It was filled with tools like vises, saws, clamps, and heat guns for softening the plastic tubes. On perforated wallboards, tools hung neatly inside their black magic-marker outlines. From a workbench Theo picked up a piece of three-quarter-inch PVC tube about two feet long. He said this was the basic element in the Strandbeests' construction, like protein in living things. "I have known about these tubes all my life," he told me. (He speaks good English.) "Building codes in Holland require that electrical wiring in buildings go through conduit tubes like these. There are millions of miles of these tubes in Holland. You see they are a cheese yellow when they are new—a good color for Holland. The tubes' brand name used to be Polyvolt, now it is Pipelife. When we were little, we used to do this with them."

He took a student notebook, tore out a sheet of graph paper, rolled it into a tight cone, wet the point of the cone with his tongue, tore off the base of the cone so it fit snugly into the tube, raised the tube to his lips, blew, and sent the paper dart smack into the wall, fifteen feet away. He is the unusual kind of adult who can do something he used to do when he was nine and not have it seem at all out of place. "I believe it is now illegal for children in Dutch schools to have these tubes," he said.

Theo grew up in Scheveningen, a small port city just north of Delft. His father, a farmer, moved the family there after losing his farm during the Second World War. In Scheveningen, the family supported itself mainly by taking in German tourists who wanted to vacation at the beach, just across the street from the Jansens' apartment. Theo remembers his mother waking him and his six brothers and four sisters early in the morning during the summers so they could deflate the air mattresses they had slept on and get them out of the living room before the guests occupying the family's beds woke up. He went to primary and secondary schools in Scheveningen, studied physics at the Delft University of Technology, and left in 1974 without a degree.

After university, he became an artist