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NEVER REALISED AND NEVER REACHED

After his departure, after being taken away
in the soft-glass twilight, in the light
of the smouldering imperfect, that brought
forth the stony ground, the dry existence
that starves out and could not provide

with a first meaning the listening of those
who breathe, a painful understanding without
loneliness, without concentration
the price a core broken loose; after having
gone along to the lane of the ancient lyres

lead high by flute music with an oriental
feel, the zenith-reaching play caught
by storm, the trees speech-singing
like tongues of fire to a rhythm intangible
even now, carries what no bitter soul

expected in the end; after being taken up
with the speed of the wind that circle spast
the trunks, shoots up, touches the tops, writes
and strikes down passively, on this smooth stone
the poet Leopold.

translated by Willem Groenewegen together with the author

The title of this poem is a line from the quatrain on the plinth of the bust of poet and classicist J.H. Leopold, formerly in the Rotterdam Museum park. My secondary school lay next to this park and during my many aimless walks whether or not in free periods, I came across this portrait time and again. When and by whom the statue had been made I didn't know.

Until years later in an antiquarian bookshop I laid hands on a yellowed volume of poetry. In it as a bookmark was the invitation to the unveiling of the bust on 11th May 1965, the poet's centenary. Through this coincidence I found out the statue had been made by the sculptress Charlotte van Pallandt.

Both Leopold and Van Pallandt were interested in Sufism. For this reason the quatrain on the plinth was taken from the Rubáiyát by the Persian poet Omar Khayyam, beautifully translated by Leopold.

* The poem itself is a variation on the first 20 lines of Leopold's most famous poem, 'Cheops', about the death and afterlife of the Egyptian pharaoh.

The dutch version, 'Nooit beseft en nooit bereikt', was set to music and sung by Peter Goedhart.

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