Slow food in the low countries

Over a meal the space time continuum takes on new meaning for an interpreter on the move.

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You can lose track of time in a Dutch restaurant. When you walk in the waiters (they come in threes) will snap into action and bring you a menu within fifteen minutes. They will then go away for a while and move a lot of plates around whilst demonstrating their effortless ability to avoid your gaze at all costs. Obeying a hidden clock they will return to take the drinks order and bring liquid refreshment quite quickly, although quick is an elastic concept so it’s probably wise not to be too thirsty when you arrive. Neither should you down your glass too quickly - you may not be asked again. The solicitous waiter/waitress will then take your food order; by now you have been waiting for a good 15-20 mins. Memories of your mother telling you not to rush your food come back.

You order has gone to the kitchen so you can sit back and relax, nip back to your hotel for a shower or take a trip to pick some tulips. Dutch kitchens are a kink in the space time continuum; the normal rules of seconds and minutes do not apply, whatever you have ordered. You may well miss the film that starts in an hour’s time but are now held fast by the languid yet unyielding hands of Dutch time management. You should always bring a book so you can escape into your own world, but take care. A customer reading a book is entertained and happy so your waiter may feel that other diners who arrived after you deserve to jump the queue rather than sit there hungry, bookless and sullen.

Finally your dinner arrives but you are by now so sunk in reading, pondering AIIC policy on congress bags or wondering if you should make your excuses and leave so you can make it to the film without risking indigestion, that it really comes as a surprise. A fried egg with a maraschino cherry, just for me? How lovely. And you realise with gratitude you might just make the midnight showing at the local fleapit.

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