Folio: Six Dutch Poets
Introduction

Between the 12th and the 22nd of April, five Dutch poets—John Schoorl, Joost Zwagerman, Hélène Gelëns, Erik Jan Harmens, and Lucas Hirsch—participated in the “New York to Pittsburgh and Back Dutch Poetry Tour,” which was organized by Hirsch and his poetry-promoting organization Small Revolution Productions, based in Haarlem, and supported by the Dutch Foundation for Literature. (The sixth poet included here and originally scheduled to participate, Pieter Boskma, had to bow out of the tour at the last minute.)

During their ten days in the U.S., this eclectic group of poets read at Columbia University, Poets House, City of Asylum in Pittsburgh, The Netherland Club in New York City, and Ledig House in Omni, New York. What follows is a very small sample of their work—and thus of contemporary Dutch poetry—from Pieter Boskma, whose first book appeared in 1987, to Lucas Hirsch, whose first book was published in 2006.

The translations—by Donald Gardner, Jonathan Reeder, Paul Vincent and Willem Groenewegen, all renowned Dutch translators—were commissioned and paid for by the Dutch Foundation for Literature.
Pieter Boskma (b. 1956)

Lightning Visit

In memoriam Czeslaw Milosz

I landed on a lily and entered the calyx
down a spiral staircase of slender smells.
Highlight of honey flowing discreetly.
And the wind that whistled between the points
that birds marked with their tenuous song
that gleamed like pearls in an early Rembrandt,
if sounds could gleam, and they did,
here they did! So in a tree there hung a whisper
of wavy gold brocade, and in the grass there trembled
the lament of a stray steppe wolf.
So here what sounded showed itself, here it did!
I sat in the calyx and buzzed
with attention to what was unfolding
under my hands: a languid silhouette
of a girl of course who was laughing
like water in summer past rocky
banks clad with exotic herbs,
and it rose like a swarm
of bees escaping the hive for the
first time, and I too was a part
of wings in the spring, climbed beyond
the possibility of being happy and saw
a fountain that rose guffawing
on a dune that just now was gloomily
drying, and saw how the lily took off its
masks and the wrinkled mug of what was
and is and shall revealed itself.

—translated by Paul Vincent
John Schoorl (b. 1961)

Kitchen Table

We’d have gone
Everywhere.
At any rate to the south
And the west.

But we didn’t go
Anywhere.
And definitely not east
Or north.

Instead we sat
at the kitchen table and talked about
the magnitude of the universe.
You’re always on my mind

The sky is full of stars and
We are trapped between

Swinging doors and plastic flowers
And see you taking over the show

Up there fattening daddy
On your casserole.

Mother, oh! mother, we’re trying hard,
But you don’t hear us anymore.

Each breath comes down a tube
And life comes loose from the leads.

We never stopped feeling your heart.

—translated by Donald Gardner

Author’s Note: “You’re always on my mind” is a track by Sam Cooke on *Kind of Blues* (1961). The lyrics are by James Woodie Alexander, an important figure in Cooke’s life. As the Specialty label gospel music scout, he discovered him and his group, the Soul Stirrers. It was also Alexander who sent him in the direction of world music, and with whom he later founded Sar Records. Alexander, who died aged 80 in 1996, also wrote many other songs for Cooke, such as “Lost and Lookin’” and “That’s where it’s at.”
Agent Coverage Takes Aim

He’s got stock reports at his fingertips
up-to-date info on traffic jams
and can name every vintage Haute Médoc.
Just ask him for the year-end stats
for hockey or soccer, how many
hat tricks scored or penalties blocked.
For that virgin seaside spot, the latest joke or
which airlines don’t charge to check your bags,
You can count on him all right, he’s a rock –
He’s your trusty insurance broker.

D-day has arrived. Agent Coverage swoops in,
a profusion of policies fanned out before us
and there we sit, a cringing, red-faced fringe.
He exposes our failings in a single breath:
Christonacrutch we’re living on the edge
no Coverage against theft flood fire
injury with or without hospitalization
and all that till long beyond death.
Warm insistence creeps into the jargon
liability insolvency mortality — what a bargain.

Deal. It’s a deal. Clauses initialed,
your sweetheart and you, now it’s time to hit the booze.
But in a far-off recess of your brain
leaks, majestic and proud, the scrap-heap of the living
junk against which we’re destined to lose.
for don’t they mock you, the most devious
of your demons, insidiously harping on
about spleen, cancer, not the real one but the lard-pit
you call home? Is there a policy that insures you against
treachery, collusion, the callous exploitation of your soul,
d’you think you’re indemnified against malice and disillusion?
Coverage has expunged the dreck and goo from your existence
now you’re the slave of non-existent certainties
in the capital clinch of risk profile and old age.
A contract killer would do the trick: let friend agony
have his way, creeping behind the hard knocks
of life-loathing and the living dead. Let your blood engage
with the cabal of percentages and loans.
All right. Go for it, taunt death with death.
Be grandly gutted. Be the noblest bag of bones.

—translated by Jonathan Reeder
Hélène Gelèns (b. 1967)

closing time

you decide: that isn’t fishy that is fishy
this here isn’t fishy that there is fishy
used to be fishy now not fishy and later

out of the dark applause
and you say vanity vanity
all is vanity, you cross out
(vanity of vanities)
say all is! all is!
all is but what it is, you cross out
all! all! you suddenly say
five o’clock is the closing time of it all

while you’re still crossing out: all al a
applause out of the dark
and you don’t know: not fishy or fishy
little borneo dragon

that the coot needs quite a run-up to rise from the water
while
one of those jubilant larks
hop! shoots straight up into the sky

that the hummingbird flutters like blazes
while
one of those long-legged storks
lazily stretches its wings in a thermal bubble and soars

that we train our skin bulges tight
while
one of those little borneo dragons
flap! unwraps its skin folds into wings and flies

—translated by Willem Groenewegen
Erik Jan Harmens (b. 1970)

Gospel for the Hard of Hearing

I don’t think I quite understood what you said
would you mind repeating it
not time after time just the once
I won’t interrupt you anymore
it’s over to you and you

when we came in we didn’t really know whether it was our time to come in
we didn’t even know who we came in on we just pulled up a chair
and had ourselves a nice meal but what got stuck between our teeth no idea
and we couldn’t ask anyone as all the other guests at the table weren’t breathing
anymore
they were cleared away like a tablecloth and high-fived into heaven

it’s not that I didn’t understand a word you were saying
I just didn’t understand the nouns
if you wouldn’t mind just writing them down on this folded out napkin
with the lipstick belonging to the lady I left behind

when we left we didn’t really know whether it was our time to leave
with every step we expected security’s hand between our shoulder blades
but look there’s the door with those apes begging for tips
and open air like a camp in your face
with all my dental plaque I praise you father

—translated by William Groenewegen
Lucas Hirsch (b. 1975)

becoming flesh

To begin with we can establish:
This guy is out of order.
—Wouter Godijn

1

because I want to be special
I wear a fish on my head

because people are hungry
I slice up my head

divide up what’s mine
first as a game of shells
hidden under cups
deftly swap them round

nobody seems to see that I
am losing my mind

I’m too small for the color
that your head’s adopting

you’ll be closer to me if we
all get up and full of shame
leave the room

be prepared to make libation
to the small god by the door

the small god
for all of your big problems
I’m not making this up
don’t ever trust a man who loses
his head during a game

don’t ever follow a man who lays
a fish on his head

and what about the little god
who has a head like
an open universe
I will connect my body with him

and which diseases do you think
are in your genes

2

it is all about
the last air
from your lungs

the established expression

monotonous as the stage
off-stage
life seen as the pumping
of your heart

dull is a death
that leaves you standing

3

my body shut out and
me attempting murder inside
people could have been killed

if it were up to me I would have left the door ajar

I would have forced a solution said goodbye before I’d shout that it must be absurd to see me plod away without bones blood or tendons

now be honest are you afraid of the activist or his activities

—translated by William Groenewegen