

## Folio: Six Dutch Poets

# Introduction

Between the 12th and the 22nd of April, five Dutch poets—John Schoorl, Joost Zwagerman, H el ene Gel ens, 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 Czesław Miłosz*

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 casseroles.

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."

## Joost Zwagerman (b. 1963)

### 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 Gelès (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