

*Eeltsje Hettinga*

## THE MISUNDERSTANDING, THIS DEPARTURE

translation David Colmer

*to a painting by Hieronymus Bosch*  
*Crossroads Eric Clapton*

In boot and shoe he stands before the distance,  
knowing, head turned at the fence, the view  
torn like his rags, his life no surer than a seeing off  
from all these hey and ho shouting rooms; cunt  
and rogue set the signboard dancing, swans  
screech, scoundrels piss, and louder than cocks,  
the windows crow the question: You,  
vagabond, what do you want  
beyond your night with a bottle and a nun's fart,  
more than the song the inn afforded,  
besides her airing underwear, lighter than the lord above  
and damp with love, flapping from the attic window?

In the hour of departure, pain scores the features.  
To face up to the roads ahead,  
to give the farmyard mongrel  
worrying his putrid bandages a whack  
to hell and back, to wring the neck  
of all that timorous rearward peeking  
over shoulders and go, leaving Rotterdam,  
or might each step beyond this brothel  
merely bring the misunderstanding closer  
that most of all, the fuss about the infinite world  
was as deep as his own Slutty Slag, whose heart  
he pierced with his dagger before he said goodbye.  
No god will wait at the gate to let him pass.

As battered as his footwear, broken and  
divided is his distracted mind. Fear restrains  
the will to open up the gate to other places  
alone, without weeping or wailing, here  
from bandaged foot to bawdyhouse, from  
pig's trough to horizon, rendered as a cross.  
Who is he? Who knows what mementos  
weigh heavy in that pack? Or the history  
of his name (made beyond the day and behind  
his journey's back)? Eye of a magpie!  
One question runs through every step he takes:  
do all the things that make Time turn  
remain an endless, drifting search for place?

## THE SEA A MIRROR

The sea a mirror but never still  
the water that talks, creates  
and makes new life, life in the shadowy

dark over the empty coast, the Cliff  
asleep as yet, as still as the wind in all  
its quarters. St... hear it muttering

and whispering in the blind  
fluttering sky over the harbour  
and shed, an ancient birth,

bursting open in a flood of light

and  
fire  
and  
light

and it's like time has stopped  
forever, but you, you know, you do,  
that every Now is always too short,

just as nothing ever lasts, besides  
the turning and tilting, later  
when the sun is hanging from the handle

of the shed door like the head  
of a dead cod and haunted by  
a rising wind the waves  
are gathering their black flowers.

A sentence, a font,

the water that gives us its love,

the water that drags us under.

Translation: David Colmer

## Winter

Under the wolf moon of a single night  
the canal shows barely a skin of ice,  
but still the boasting, blathering  
words go gliding over barflies' tables:  
the icy sweep of wide black lakes,  
oh, man, one faster than the other  
in the old attempt to keep ahead  
of Time's infernal bird-trap.

\*

Thinking of my parents and Auden, with  
snowstorms in the streets of New York  
and shades, whinnying as they circle  
the hoary paddocks up past Burgwerd,  
I'm pissed in a pub near the Potmarge  
and staring at the snow-splashed windows  
that stare straight back at me like eyes  
from a blind, white no-man's land.

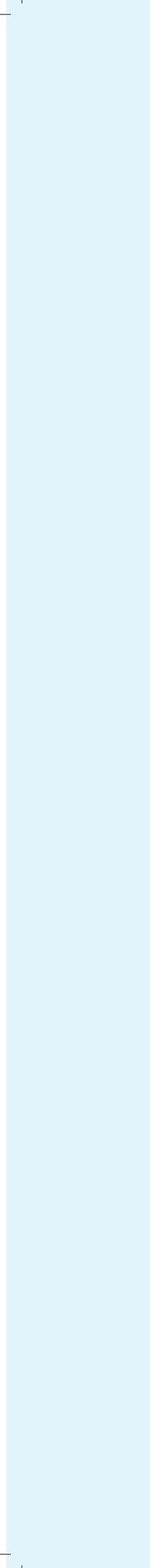
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There was a fire that sparked from a father's blades,  
when he, faster than the light below Woudsend  
(Under our breath we called, 'Hey,  
don't you need to look where you're going?')  
flew into a hole in the ice and just as breakneck,  
almost galloping, came shooting back out  
into the light again north of Sloten. Oh, man,  
thousands wouldn't, but I do, dark night.

\*

What is white if not blind, says the girl  
with the easel on her back who wants  
to paint beyond the dyke as nothing less  
than time that's snow because we, a vanishing, we,  
a little night music floating under the ice,  
like language that slowly goes mute  
in all the things that can't be said, say,  
snow's face beyond the dyke.

\*



As winter skates into a hole in the ice  
while the light, that ousted queen, loathsome  
and foul, brushes the Emma's wet quays,  
I stop by a cat that's lying, half-dead,  
on the Gijsbert's clinkers, and think  
– for nothing now can ever come to  
any good? – of the future of my language,  
my Frisian, in winter's dark bird-trap.

Translation: David Colmer

## The drowned flats

*For Theunis Piersma*

Last night I saw the mudflats drowned.  
Restlessness took hold of the towns  
and villages. The underwater bells  
toll in the tops of the trees.

The Stone Man was up to his neck.  
Dikes washed away, ripped  
open like a summer frock. A country  
disappeared in rising seas.

Drifting islands rolled drunkenly  
past Holwerd, further and further  
into the inundated landscape.  
Last night I saw the mudflats drowned.

And floating in attics and towers,  
uprooted like trees, the dead  
rose on waves as dark  
and gloomy as primordial soup.

It is the year twenty-one  
twenty-one. At the tabernacle  
of time and tide a magician  
turns the clock back to a long,

hot summer with islands, raised up  
from sandbanks where flocks  
of birds cry Africa, Africa.  
Last night I saw the mudflats drowned.

Translation: David Colmer

## Ship bird lân

'Substitute', The Who

Sliced open, my body lay on the coast  
below the foaming, scud-spitting horizon.

I was a treasure trove of junk and rubbish.  
Stomach bulging with everything

that has an indestructible forever:  
all plastic, so that I was stuffed

from head to tail and wing to wing  
before I'd ever taken flight.

It was to the tolling of the bell that  
rings out over the mud flats at Wier

that I woke from my dreams with a start,  
aghast at the driving snow, grains

with no more soul than mindless oil.  
And as the rolling white hail swept

the fields, I knew: We're all born  
with plastic spoons in our mouths.

Translation: David Colmer