

Looking for Leeway

K. Michel as Alice in Wonderland

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[A D Z U I D E R E N T]

In the course of the 1980s, a new generation of poets emerged in the Netherlands. Their appearance was accompanied by a great deal of tub-thumping and polemics, with Joost Zwagerman as the most important voice, in the magazine *De Held* (The Hero) and the anthology *Maximaal* (To the Maximum, 1988): work by poets who set the tone at the time like Rutger Kopland, C.O. Jellema and T. van Deel was dismissed as introverted and shrivelled up, as hermeticism that had outlived itself. Their own poetry on the other hand, which was labelled 'vital' and 'extrovert', was presented (in a famous quote from Lucebert) as an expression of 'the space of the fullness of life'.

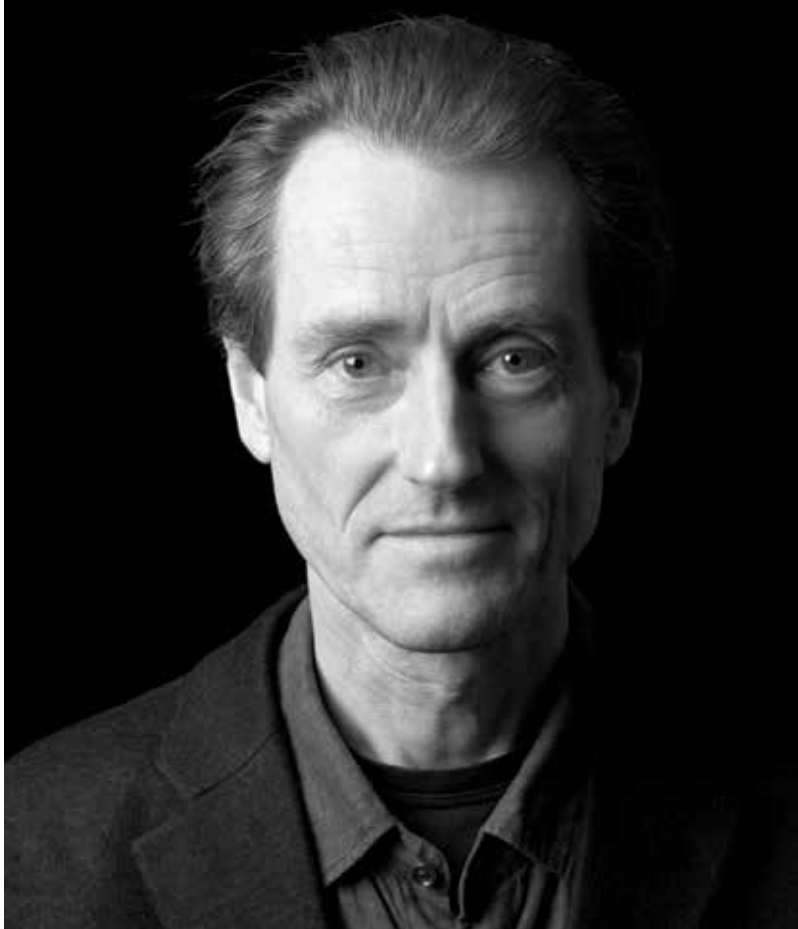
Elsewhere this new generation presented itself more playfully and on the sidelines in the magazine *AapNootMies* edited by Arjen Duinker and K. Michel. Their rejection of recent Dutch poetry was more implicit: they drew their inspiration from the broader international tradition of William Carlos Williams, Fernando Pessoa, Octavio Paz and others.

The core group of the Maximalists, to be found in trendy artistic circles in Amsterdam, was very concerned with the 'image' of poetry, created by grand gestures and stories surrounding the poem. Michel and Duinker on the other hand, who in the period of *AapNootMies* were studying philosophy in Groningen, were more interested in what Walter Benjamin called the 'aura' of art, the fascination generated by language.

Yet it is not surprising that several poems by Michel (1958), to whom I shall restrict myself in what follows, were also included in *Maximaal*. Like 'Code', which later found its way without a title into his debut collection *Ja! Naakt als de stenen* (Yes! Naked as the Stones, 1989). With its ecstatic exclamation marks and imperatives, this poem testifies to lyrical entrepreneurship:

Poet!
Comb your hair, shine your shoes!
Put on your inner life!
We're going to shake hands with the wind.
We're going to greet the horizon.

So much to see! So much to do!



K. Michel
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With hindsight, it is easy to see that in fact it is only the externals of open form, exclamation marks and verbal dynamics with which this early poetry of Michel's fits in with that of his Maximalist contemporaries. His poetic enterprise (with combed hair and polished shoes – not the cliché of the maladjusted artist, but rather like someone applying for a respectable job) is principally a search for the inner self and the 'freedom of movement in the etiquette of language, in the codes that prescribe the way to do it,' as he formulated it later. The title of his collected poems, *Speling zoeken* (Looking for Leeway, 2016), is the short summary of this aim.

The search for the inner self is given a clear shape in the long poem 'De weg van het water' (The Way of the Water), with which *Ja! Naakt als de stenen* concludes. In this high point from his early work we hear of a strange kind of journey along various European rivers, made by an I-figure 'to investigate / whether rivers live like people'. Like Wallace Stevens, one of the godfathers of Michel's early work, who in his poem 'The Idea of Order at Key West' gives the sea a voice, whose words must be ordered by a poet, the I-figure in Michel's poem sets himself the 'problem of ordering' and also finds the solution to this problem mainly in poetry. The Meuse at Charleville, the Guadalquivir at Seville, the Svratka at Brno; with one river it is Arthur Rimbaud who gives him an insight, with the other Federico García Lorca, with the third Velimir Chlebnikov,

the Russian sound poet. He takes something for the journey from each one. But only in the Drowned Land of Saeftinghe, not a flowing river, but an area of salt marshes that is periodically flooded, does he realise that he has been barking up the wrong tree:

*And I suddenly saw
that man's inner self is not a river
but a drowned land
that consists of channels and mud flats
worn away by time and silted up
covered with marram grass and samphire
[...]
The inner self has no essence
that can express it.
It is a form that fills and empties
and in seasons like autumn and spring drowns.
No, not form but matter
where nothing would grow without the tide.*



There are no sources, there is no kernel, everything is liquid. Thales of Milete, the Ancient Greek, would have nodded in agreement, as would the postmodern philosopher Zygmunt Bauman.

Philosopher, pataphysicist, poet

One can deduce from this one example that studying philosophy has left its mark on Michel. Yet he emphatically denies that he is a philosopher: 'I can't think and argue well enough to be able to call myself one', he maintains. For that reason the poet Rutger Kopland has called him a pataphysicist, the practitioner of a poetic science that has the characteristics of a good joke. Embarking on a trip through the whole of Europe to find out whether rivers live like people is one such joke: something totally irrational is given a semblance of rationality. In its comic seriousness, this logic is akin to that in *Alice in Wonderland*.

That is, for example, also the case in 'Daaag' (Hi-i-i) in the collection *Bij eb is je eiland groter* (Your Island's Bigger at Low Tide, 2010), in which Michel tells us that he is unable to say anything substantial about the hereafter as long as he has not been there. At the same time he is aware that true endings do not exist, and that everything just continues. Whereupon, to solve this dilemma, he conjures up a splendid image, in which the poet easily wins out over the philosopher:

*a traffic sign
(at a junction near Han-sur-Lesse)
with two forceful bossy arrows
under the one pointing left
it says toutes directions
under the one pointing right
autres directions*

With Michel two signs at an arbitrary junction give a greater insight than systematic thought. In this poetry insight always comes incidentally: the world is full of interference and the poet wants to let the reader experience that. Because although his ultimate objective is to filter signals that offer an insight from this noise, Michel likes to leave the noise intact in his poems. As in 'Zijn oude vriend Norman Malcolm kijkt terug' (His Old Friend Norman Malcolm Looks Back) from the recent collection *Te voet is het heelal drie dagen ver* (On Foot the Universe is Three Days Away, 2016), based on a biographical essay by Norman Malcolm on the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In five successive stanzas, we learn that Wittgenstein was a good whistler, loved fairs, had a blooming pot plant in his room, as a guest was keen to help with the washing-up, etc. All interference, that is, amusing but of little importance for our knowledge of the philosopher – this Wittgenstein could have featured in a children's story.

As if he has not yet made the philosopher everyday enough, the poet lays it on even thicker in a final, extra-long stanza, by informing us that Wittgenstein, Malcolm and his wife once went for a walk together. Only then does the philosopher the reader had been waiting for loom up: during the walk Wittgenstein proposes representing the motion of the sun, earth and moon. Wittgenstein, who plays the part of the moon, has to run for all he is worth (around Malcolm, the earth, who himself moves in turn around his wife, the sun, calmly advancing in a straight line), with the result that he becomes dizzy and sees the horizon waving up and down. The poem ends with a question that puts what precedes it in a different light: 'Did that line then belong as a contour in the immense field / or in the plane of the sky? And our life does it know no end as our field of vision knows no limit?' In this way the poem finally forces its way, through all the anecdotal interference, to one of Wittgenstein's central assertions: 'The limits of language are the limits of the world.'

Unlike for many modern artists for Michel limits are not in the first place there to be overstepped, but to be explored. He is fascinated by places where one thing touches on another, both in the everyday world and in a much wider context. For example, the prose-poem 'Ontmoetingen' (Meetings) from *Bij eb is je eiland groter* offers a series of visual observations on borderline situations such as 'the [suit]case is a cross between there and here', 'in the revolving door the lobby draws breath' and 'when you are asleep you are somewhere between present and far away': ingenious, spiritual, often comic, in a natural tone and focussed on the ambiguity of language.

In addition, a poet in the twenty-first century doesn't necessarily have it any easier than primitive man. At least you can infer that from 'Uit de bomen afgedaald' (Descending from the Trees) in *Kleur de schaduwen* (Colour the Shadows, 2004), a poem about the evolution of language. That evolution goes from cries such as 'Ow', 'mmm' and 'brr', via simply formulated observations as 'ape stares we not' to our capacity to say 'garden furniture cushion storage bag' and 'fluctuating interest rate'. However, in stretching the limits of language the chance of losing oneself in the increased language interference or getting stuck is proportionally greater.

An exploration of limits in a wider sense is implied by the title 'On Foot the Universe is Three Days Away'. This is an allusion to the Kármán Line, at a height of 100 kilometres, which is regarded as the border between Earth's atmosphere and space. The idea that one could go there on foot is of course



absurd, but it is true that someone who walks at a fast pace can cover a hundred kilometres in three days. As he frequently does, just like Carroll's Alice, Michel here too reduces the thought of what exceeds our comprehension to the proportions of daily life.

(In parentheses: if there is a Dutch-language tradition into which this poetry fits it is that of K. Schippers and Gerrit Krol, both poets with a lightness of touch and a sharp eye for the chance, odd and often fairly arbitrary connections in life.)

In other poems someone has an insight while singing in the shower or while waiting at a raised bridge watching a ship sail past ('The Skinny Bridge Miracle', *Waterstudies*, 1999), when listening to the royal speech at the state opening of parliament or when a child submits a language puzzle answer to him. All the information, pronouncements or images present in everyday reality are usable for Michel. There is no question of any hierarchy. If something is tracked down, that is anyway often by chance. As in 'De meeuw van Treytel' (Treytel's Seagull) from *Boem de nacht* (Boom the Night, 1994), in which disparate events count as 'souvenirs of a lost connection':

*As my life unfolds
and disintegrates into increasingly capricious patterns
I receive such signals all the more
eagerly; souvenirs of a lost
connection; the suggestion that round the corner
happiness waits for a collision*

Bewilderment and astonishment

From the very beginning Michel's poetry met with considerable appreciation, from readers and from critics. Of the collections in the omnibus edition *Speling zoeken, Ja! Naakt als de stenen* and *Boem de nacht* are each in their third edition, his most successful collection, *Waterstudies*, in its seventh and both *Kleur de schaduwen* and *Bij eb is je eiland groter* in their fifth. Prize juries also show appreciation for his work. *Boem de nacht* was awarded the Herman Gorter Prize, *Waterstudies* both the VSB Poetry Prize and the Jan Campert Prize, while *Bij eb is je eiland groter* won the Awater Poetry Prize and the Guido Gezelle Prize.

Critics value him for the wittiness of his observations, his ability to put the everyday in a new perspective, his eye for the mysterious, his hidden melancholy, his lucidity. The critic Rob Schouten talked of a 'pleasant and intriguing kind of poetic freedom' and Mustafa Stitou of 'light-footed bewilderment'.

Bewilderment and astonishment often go hand in hand in Michel's work. In his prose collection *Tingeling & Totus* (1992) he introduces two characters, each of which embodies one of these reactions: Tingeling, who moves through life 'like the clouds through the sky' and whose attention is drawn to 'the rhythm of things', feels only bewilderment and optimism at the constant changes in reality, while in Totus dismay and astonishment are given form. By separating and then confronting these two sides of his writer's personality, Michel is able constantly to surprise the reader.

Both the Tingeling and Totus sides feature in 'Vers twee' (Verse Two, *Waterstudies*), in which Michel comments on the Hebrew text of the second verse

of the Book of Genesis, 'tohu wa bohu'. To begin with he limits himself to the sound of the words, their suggestiveness, the landscapes evoked by, let's say, 'the rhythm of things'. But after he has translated them ('the earth without form and void'), he realises how astonishing and unimaginable their meaning is. Subsequently this Totusish heaviness is lightened by a Tingelingian insight: 'Perhaps the sudden convulsion which shudders / through your body just before you fall asleep / is a distant aftershock of that original violence'.

In this way Michel is able to lighten his heavy subjects in all kinds of ways, now by the choice of a particular perspective, now by consistently maintaining an absurd image. In 'Vlinderverhuizing' (Emigration of the Butterflies, *Bij eb is je eiland groter*) he presents the disturbance of the natural balance through global warming as a newspaper report that he reads to the puss sitting at the window. In 'De lach van Rutte' (Rutte's Laugh, *Te voet is het heelal drie dagen ver*) his anger at the lack of vision of those in power, politicians and journalists takes the form of a verbal cartoon. In it the prime minister Mark Rutte, after years of 'smiling / smirking, giggling, grinning / chuckling, sniggering, joking / guffawing, exploding with laughter, laughing his head off, thigh-slapping [...]' suddenly loses control of his laugh, which consequently detaches from his face, crashes to the ground and runs away. At that moment all journalists turn away from Rutte and follow his laugh. The message is clear: what the prime minister has to say has long ceased to count. What people are after is his image.



Translated by Paul Vincent

Squeezed into a confined space

Michel has frequently given voice to his concern about political and social developments. As early as *Boem de nacht*, his second collection, he sketches himself as someone who 'after the fall of the Berlin Wall / [...] / and the invasion of Grenada and Panama / and the hijacking of the currency market' sits in his attic room pulling his hair out 'over the dust storm of news facts / and the ubiquitous lack of vision'. At the same time, he is aware that the resistance of a poet is always paper resistance – see the poem 'Paris / Charlie 7-1-15' (*Te voet is het heelal drie dagen ver*): from bookmarks and pious pronouncements which after the news of the slaughter in Paris he shakes out of the holy books ('matter seeking for purity'), the I-figure kneads a paper snowball, after which he sits and waits helplessly 'for the uncontrollable melting'. Obviously poetry offers him no more leeway than this. The search for leeway assumes a very literal form in 'En zo ging het' (And That's How It Went, *Te voet is het heelal drie dagen ver*). In it the I-figure is given 'a box-like thing in cardboard', but as it grows larger and larger, he cannot get a grip on it. Finally he is able to squeeze inside it, in 'a space where you can't stand / can't lie or sit.' Just as the expanding Alice gets stuck in the White Rabbit's house, he has to look for 'an attitude / for leeway'. That search is not a game, it is the position in which the poet finds himself: squeezed into a confined space. ■

FURTHER READING

Speling zoeken. Alle gedichten tot nu, atlas contact, Amsterdam, 2016 (Collected poems).

Four Poems

By K. Michel



Treytel's Seagull

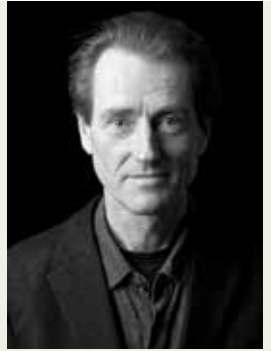
Through the open window a starling
flies into Hans Broek's studio
and on its way shits on the painting
in the blue area top left
'Finished' growls the painter

Three metres behind the car the bridge collapses

We walk late in the evening through
Verversstraat and stop to
inspect a courtyard
From a window come waves of panting
o's and a's from two, no three voices
and only then do I see the sign
Bianca Castafiore Square

'Reality goes far too far'
complains my friend the poet and grins
'we couldn't make it up'

God used to live, I kid you not
around the corner from us, on Bosscheweg
His initials were J.H.L.
He was a bailiff by profession



See also Rust Garage on the Zeeburgerdijk

'On Saturday evening a cyclist waited
three hours at the opened Caland Bridge in the Europoort
After midnight the man heard from patrolling
policemen that the bridge was closed until Sunday afternoon
for maintenance work'

And then that bird that in the 1960s
in thick fog in the Sparta-Feyenoord match
lost its way and in a goal kick by goalie
Treytel was hit by the ball

As my life unfolds
and disintegrates into increasingly capricious patterns
I receive such signals all the more
eagerly; souvenirs of a lost
connection; the suggestion that around the corner
happiness waits for a collision

Complex processes: if I walk barefoot
over the tiles to the balcony,
I start sneezing

From: *Boem de nacht* (Boom the Night),
Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 1994



De meeuw van Treytel

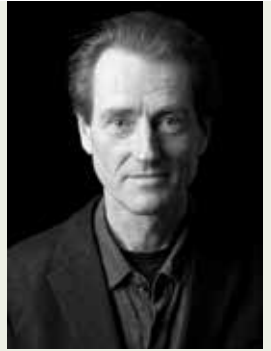
Door het open raam vliegt een spreekw
het atelier van Hans Broek binnen
en kakt onderweg op het schilderij
in het blauwe vlak linksboven
'Klaar' bromt de schilder

Drie meter achter de auto stort de brug in

We lopen 's avonds laat door
de Verversstraat en staan stil om
een binnenpleintje te bekijken
Uit een raam golven hijgende
o's en a's van twee, nee drie stemmen
en pas dan zie ik het bordje
Bianca Castafiore Plein

'De werkelijkheid gaat veel te ver'
klaagt mijn vriend de dichter en grijnst
'dat zouden wij niet mogen verzinnen'

God woonde vroeger, echt waar
bij ons om de hoek, op de Bosscheweg
Zijn initialen waren J.H.L.
Hij was van beroep deurwaarder



Zie ook Garage Roest op de Zeeburgerdijk

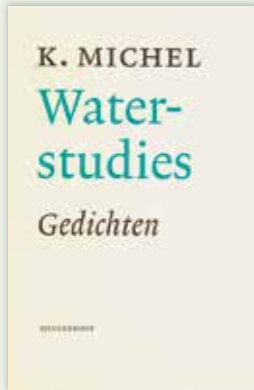
‘Een fietser heeft zaterdagavond drie uur
voor de geopende Calandbrug in de Europoort gewacht
Na middernacht hoorde de man van surveillerende
agenten dat de brug tot zondagmiddag
wegens werkzaamheden was gesloten’

En dan de vogel die in de jaren zestig bij dichte
mist in de wedstrijd Sparta-Feyenoord
verdwaalde en bij een uittrap van doelman
Treytel getroffen werd door de bal

Naarmate mijn leven zich ontrott
en ontbindt in steeds grilliger patronen
ontvang ik dit soort signalen des te
gretiger; souvenirs van een vergane
samenhang; de suggestie dat om de hoek
het geluk wacht op een botsing

Complexe processen: als ik op blote
voeten over de tegels naar het balkon
loop, begint mijn neus te niezen

From: *Boem de nacht* (Boom the Night),
Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 1994



Verse Two

On rereading it sounds like
a postcoital feeling of melancholy
tohu wa bohu, tohu wa bohu

If you repeat this aloud
you see landscapes unfold
a November sand bank in the Waddensee
the desolate plains southeast of Glen Coe
and you start smelling peat, slate
two hanging hares in the barn

Five syllables heavy as lead
with more weight than all the elements combined
tohu wa bohu, the earth without form and void
in the Hebrew text of Genesis one verse two

What they are supposed to mean is unimaginable
the beginning before the beginning, a condition so primeval
that my suburban imagination has
only inadequate comparisons to hand

Even Hollywood-style earthquakes
tidal waves, hurricanes and volcanic eruptions
must be peanuts compared with the horror back then

Perhaps the sudden convulsion which shudders
through your body just before you fall asleep
is a distant aftershock of that original violence

A convulsion that says:
there is sleep, there are dreams
languidly floating, swaying under water
but there is no ground to carry us

Vers twee

Bij herlezing klinkt het als
een postcoïtaal gevoel van droefenis
tohoe wa bohoe, tohoe wa bohoe

Als je het hardop herhaalt
zie je landschappen zich ontvouwen
een novemberse zandplaat in de Waddenzee
de desolate vlaktes ten zuidoosten van Glen Coe
en ga je turf ruiken, leisteen
twee adelende hazen in de schuur

Vijf loeizware lettergrepen
met meer gewicht dan alle elementen tezamen
tohoe wa bohoe, de aarde woest en ledig
in de Hebreeuwse tekst van Genesis een vers twee

Wat ze moeten aanduiden is onvoorstelbaar
het begin voor het begin, een toestand zo oer
dat mijn buitenwijkverbeelding slechts
tekortschietende vergelijkingen voorhanden heeft

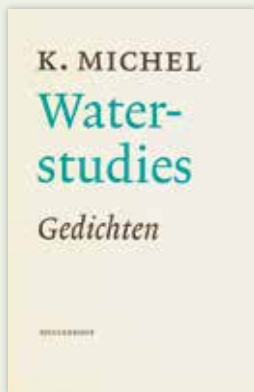
Ook Hollywoodiaanse aardbevingen
vloedgolven, orkanen en vulkaanuitbarstingen
moeten peanuts zijn vergeleken met de horror van toen

Misschien is de plotse stuiptrekking die
vlak voor je in slaap valt door je lichaam schrikt
een verre naschok van dat oorspronkelijke geweld

Een stuip die zegt:
er is slaap, er zijn dromen
loom drijvende, onder water wiegende
maar gedragen worden wij door geen grond

From: *Waterstudies* (Waterstudies),
Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 1999





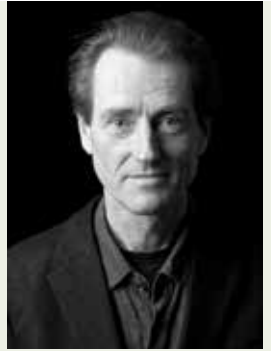
The Skinny Bridge Miracle

The first two boats passed smoothly
but the third was a deeply laden barge
which approached so slowly that (present for Karin
pasta, cream, beans, call plumber)

Suddenly the barge looms up close
and I see that it is completely filled
with water that flows in jaunty waves
from the dark hold over the sides

Above the waiting people
the fatigue of the working day has grown
into an almost visible bunch of text balloons

Wrapped in thoughts and concerns
we do not see that from the barge
all the water in the Amstel wells up
Incognito the source of the river floats past



Het Magerebrugwonder

De eerste twee boten passeerden vlot
maar de derde was een diep geladen aak
die zo traag naderde dat (cadeau Karin
pasta, room, boontjes, loodgieter bellen)

Plotseling doemt de aak dichtbij op
en zie ik dat hij geheel gevuld is
met water dat in springerige golfjes
uit het donkere ruim over de boorden stroomt

Boven de wachtende mensen
is de moeheid van de werkdag uitgegroeid
tot een bijna zichtbare tros tekstballonnen

Verwikkeld in gedachten en beslommeringen
zien we niet dat uit de aak
al het water van de Amstel opwelt
Incognito drijft de bron van de rivier voorbij

From: *Waterstudies* (Waterstudies),
Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 1999



Butterfly Removal

Puss sits at the window, looks with nervous movements of its head at the birds on the balcony.

Yes Puss, islands move
birds migrate, woods advance
tectonic plates shift, icebergs float
souls transmigrate, finches mutate and
paperclips relocate from desk to desk.

Listen Puss, I say, unfolding the newspaper
'Climate change is forcing many butterflies
towards the cooler north, but they do not fly
fast enough to keep up with the warming process.
British biologists have come up with a solution:
they ferry the butterflies by car.'
And it works, Puss, they report here.
Populations of small skippers and
melanargia galathea are given a smooth lift
in soft cages and have successfully
established themselves a long way north.
Imagine: clean fresh air
white nights, blooming heathlands.
Puss gives me a searching look, ears pricked.
'Because the method appears to work the biologists
want to transfer populations more often.
Species that cannot keep up with the warming process
should be given a hand.'
I look up and close the newspaper.
Fine mess, says Puss's look, if we go on
this way, the North Pole will soon be in sight.

Vlinderverhuizing

Poes zit voor het raam, kijkt
met nerveuze kop beweginkjes
naar de vogeltjes op het balkon.

Ja Poes, eilanden wandelen
vogels trekken, bossen rukken op
aardplaten schuiven, ijsbergen drijven
zielen verhuizen, vinken muteren en
paperclips migreren van bureau naar bureau.

Luister Poes, zeg ik, de krant omvouwend
'De klimaatverandering dwingt veel vlinders
naar het koelere noorden, maar ze vliegen niet
snel genoeg om de opwarming bij te benen.
Britse biologen verzonnen een oplossing:
ze brengen de vlinders per auto.'
En dat werkt, Poes, schrijven ze hier.
Populaties van het geelsprietdikkopje
en het dambordje kregen in zachte kooien
een vlotte lift en hebben zich met succes
een flink eind naar het noorden gevestigd.
Stel je voor: schone frisse lucht
witte nachten, bloeiende heidevelden.
Poes kijkt mij vorsend aan, de oortjes gespist.
'Omdat de methode lijkt te werken willen
de biologen vaker populaties verhuizen.
Soorten die de opwarming niet bijhouden
zou je een handje moeten helpen.'
Ik kijk op en vouw de krant dicht.
Mooie boel, zegt de blik van Poes, als we zo
doorstomen, ja dan komt de Noord pool snel in zicht.



All poems translated by Paul Vincent

From: *Bij eb is je eiland groter* (Your Island's Bigger at Low Tide),
Augustus, Amsterdam/Antwerpen, 2010