

Nederlands
letterenfonds
dutch foundation
for literature

Alfred Schaffer

Man Animal Thing

Passionate poetry about a legendary tyrant

‘On every page of this thick collection, the poems flow like a river, there is staggering pace in the collection and also an unusual amount of pleasure in the writing. (...) Non-fiction becomes poetry thanks to a masterful sense of control. A collection like *Man Animal Thing* is unprecedented in the Netherlands.’

Erik Lindner for *Poetry International*

In 2014, Alfred Schaffer's latest poetry collection, *Man Animal Thing* was published and met with instant acclaim. 'This book is a real happening in poetry ... a masterpiece,' according to leading daily *NRC Handelsblad*. And another daily, *Trouw*, wrote: 'Schaffer shows what kind of animal things a man is capable of and how little human lives are sometimes worth. He does this with humour, with *schwung*, tenderly and thoughtfully; in poetry in which bloodlust can look like a "massive bar of dark chocolate." (...) *Man Animal Thing* grabs you by the throat, not a common occurrence with poetry.'

Partly inspired by *Chaka*, a famous South African novel from 1931, written by Thomas Mofolo, the book charts the imaginary progress of the nineteenth-century statesman and tyrant, Shaka Zulu (1787-1828). Structured around a series of daydreams and major events in Zulu's life, the poet extracts Zulu from the historical past and moves him to the modern media age where speed dating, UFOs and effervescent painkillers are the norm. The collection is hugely diverse, from lyrical poetry to tweets - to wit: 'SHAKA'S COURT CASE LIVE FROM NEWS24':

'This rarely happens to me but when I read the first pages of Alfred Schaffer's *Mens Dier Ding*, I instantly felt like an explorer. That feeling only grew stronger as I reached the end of this lyrical epic. This book is a happening in the poetry world. (...) A masterpiece.'
Arie van den Berg in *NRC Handelsblad* (*****)

7:20 *A closely-guarded Shaka Zulu hurries through the Court's back entrance.*

7:41 *The row of journalists at the main entrance twists and turns like a spastic snake.*

8:13 @SimonsHo6. *Made it! We're on the fourth row! S. crumpled up next to his mother on the front row. #Shakasmus*

Schaffer's poetry has shifted from linguistic experimentation, unsettling observations in a sober business-like tone and reflections on life's incoherence to a more mature, overarching vision in which formal and conceptual experiment goes hand in hand with lucid, lyrical texts. His early promise has been more than realised.

Alfred Schaffer

Eleven poems from *Man Animal Thing* (2014)

translated by
Michele Hutchison

Day (Dream) # 9,377

Day (Dream) # 5,106

SHAKA FINALLY FINDS THE LOVE OF HIS LIFE

'Visit' - Day (Dream) # 3,623

SHAKA'S BRIEF FLIRTATION WITH ROMANCE

'Self-portrait as 007' - Day (Dream) # 1,516

'New Year' - Day (Dream) # 1,354

'Self-portrait as Sinterklaas' - Day (Dream) # 1,015

Day (Dream) # 598

Day (Dream) # 526

Day (Dream) # 3

Day(Dream) # 9,377

I'd been home maybe an hour
when I slipped out again.
Not long before the sun would set
I walked up the road to the woods behind the railway line
and the football pitches, carrying my homemade spear.
Its point a dreadful screech.
They said a dog had got out
some rare breed, jet black as a sermon,
the froth that was on its jaws.
Barking to stay ahead of the darkness
I flitted after my shadow between the trees
until a solid curtain was ripped away.
Something was there, half-buried under a few leaves and sand.
I raised my spear, took a step forwards and froze.
As though I had suddenly forfeited the right to speak –
my T-shirt stuck to my body
the prism of my skin was like a flickering dream
For a short time I emitted light
and then I was put out.

Day(Dream) # 5,106

The classic shoot-out.
And with so much competition too
it's bizarre, it makes my balls tingle.
I stand on one side and on the other side
there's me too, only the leaked version with a cold.
The albino smurf cut out of The Smurfs
and somewhere else I forgot.
Tension crackles like a fire in a paper factory.
I take another really good look –
how fat I've become, god almighty, I'm not solid.
Like a dictator in formaldehyde.
Between us a boundless expanse, a concrete polar region.
Actually just a mixture of sand and grass
no larger than the back garden I used to lie in.
I see myself thinking but that's not my body
that's not me, I would never grope around my jacket pocket
for a mouth organ
to play a foolish little tune on.

SHAKA FINALLY FINDS THE LOVE OF HIS LIFE

in one of his mother's fashion magazines.
Those eyes and that small chin, those cheekbones!
Calls her N, how should he describe her?
Like an evening stroll after a magical film
Like a drive in a dilapidated Beetle
between rocky mountains, he meanders along a glassy stream
and suddenly the sun breaks through
the sunlight breaks through the air, far below
is the valley where he will spend the night.
N! Like an abrupt taste that explodes in your mouth
heavy rain at the height of summer.
As addictive as a football game.
His biographer complains of hackneyed imagery never mind
as long as it works, Shaka thinks.
Who crushes so guilelessly but cannot dance.
Who keeps treading on his partner's toes.
Has no idea how to offer a drink
how to kiss with your whole mouth.
As a young boy he was often teased about love.
'Fat Babette is shagging Shaka'
and 'Shaka = Nerd' in giant letters
on the side wall of the corner shop.
Bitter, he ran home, hid himself away
in his bedroom and didn't come out for days.

He concentrates on sharpening the point of his spear
and wonders whether N knows that he exists.
Whether in her dreams he rescues her from the flames
and whether she sprays a little perfume between her breasts
while looking at his photo, leaves the dinner to burn
disguises her imperfections with make-up
while humming 'They can't take that away from me'.
About four times a week and
crazy with longing he heads towards
the red-lit backstreets of the village.
He stays there until he hasn't a cent left.
Long after midnight he's still roaming the streets.
Living from minute to minute
on his way to more and still more life.

'Visit' – Day(Dream) # 3,623

Sweat pours down my back I've suddenly lost my script.
I stand there messing around with a map
it seems like an eternity.
Bare trees, tidy streets, shutters closed
but all the houses are inhabited.
At least that's what I heard.
I leave the engine running just in case.
My car is made of stainless steel but where I go I go in peace.
No stopover this day with potholes in the road
and mist, traffic jams, arid brush, nothing but sand
and all of it without stars without light.
As though I were wandering through my own brain
as though I had drowned in a sea of mercury –
perhaps I'm not reading the map right.
It's freezing cold here.
Reeling with lightness I tread on a dog, I think
something hairy, it lies there motionless.
If only someone would speak to me, someone who could
understand me.
I mean, it's already evening
I think I should have gone left there
at that playground
only it's a dead end street.

SHAKA'S BRIEF FLIRTATION WITH ROMANCE

One day he appeared at her door like an apparition.
It must have been his first and last attempt.
Bunch of flowers in his hand, some roses and chrysanthus
clean smoke blowing out of the smoke machine behind him
and the universe dangling on ropes
consciously apolitical and shining.
It had cost a pretty penny, some serious logistics
and bloodshed, but his anticipatory pleasure
set its sights on the spectacle in her bed.
If anyone had tried to pull one over on him
at that moment, he would have stood his ground.
Knocked and then again and then again.
After some discussion it turned out
he was at the wrong house!
Laughing in disbelief, locals slid
down from the trees, windows were closed again
even the ladies from the drum band made an about turn.
He was led off silently
a decrepit barge in an immense canal
and people forgot about the whole business so that it
would never happen again.

'Self-portrait as 007' – Day(Dream) # 1,516

Something has gone wrong.
I hang like shot game catching copious amounts of wind
high above a city.
Office glass everywhere, the blood slowly leaves my arms.
Something burning in the distance, a pack of dogs
bark angrily on the asphalt down below
helicopters hover out of sight rattling like egg whips.
Up to now, I'd always done my own stunts.
I utter a few screams that aren't in the script
that I fought evil with evil
evil was like a cockroach.
I always turned up when needed
before wandering off triumphantly into the future during the
closing scenes
my deeds and misdeeds forgiven and forgotten –
I never shot my mouth off
I'd rather let go.

'New Year' – Day(Dream) # 1,354

It had cooled down.
On my minuscule balcony
I didn't stand a chance against the hubbub
so before going to sleep I cast down the anchor
from the second floor, it was fixed to the outside wall
by a heavy chain.
It disappeared into the ground with a muffled splat.
A gaggle of geese drifted around in the grass beneath my flat
like a drunkard's prayer.
I'd bet on them being geese – cackling
white-grey splodges.
Not long after midnight half awake
and overcome by blindness
I was drawn towards the window that was now open, just caught
a glimpse of the village vanishing into the horizon.
The chain the anchor had been fixed to
swung wildly back and forth.
I closed the window as quietly as I could
not wanting to make a noise, and went
back to bed.

'Self-portrait as Sinterklaas' – Day(Dream) # 1,015

Loud banging on the door.
If it wasn't me
I'd dive behind the curtains screaming.
I came by train – my horse died
the boat sank, I crawl onto the roofs, spent.
If I do speak, I speak ten to the dozen
if I hold my tongue I'm very old
full of lies and deceit
no longer afraid to shake God's hand.
When it's my turn to go
I pull on my ordinary clothes, buy a first class single
slumber on the way like a guard
step out on a windswept platform
and shuffle incognito,
the sunlight in my neck,
along a sandy path, dead normal.
How well I recognize everything here
I'm already walking faster than just now
until, as elated as a small child
I break into a run.

Day(Dream) # 598

The mountain pass is notorious.
On the left the tangles of the pine trees
and on the right the planets and stars.
Sometimes I was overtaken, sometimes I had to brake
black-brown clouds charged along ahead of me
as though I should hurry but I was in no hurry.
I drove upwards like in a children's song.
One sharp bend to go and then the highest point of the pass –
a few seconds as light as a skeleton
before everything goes tearing downhill.
I accelerated a bit and held my breath ready
when suddenly I was overcome
by a deep sleep, as clammy as thick fog.
All sound was silenced.
I quickly threw her into second and forced,
though I'd existed a moment ago,
like a velvet drill in heavenly matter.
Whether I was on my way home, or alone
or accompanied – I've clean forgotten.
Apart from that it was the depth of winter
and then that road, that hateful road
that just kept on climbing and climbing
there is no end to it.

Day(Dream) # 526

This bare space that I crossed with enough ammo for a week.
I was hitched to a truck here
as I roared the first lines of the national anthem.
Only the first lines, for the melody.
I learned to slaughter animals here
the innards in a burlap sack and chucked onto the fire.
Here the game was to beat death.
Cycling, jumping ditches and this was where seven kids
peed over me and I stayed prostrate until I could get up again
here I ran through the garden on a summer's evening
chasing her – whether she'd giggle, all that low light.
If I don't watch out, I'll take one cautious step back
and another step and step by step
I step away from myself. Only once I'm far enough away
and can no longer hear myself, I turn around and
begin to run like mad.
How quiet it is today.
As quiet as a forest in winter.
As quiet as a bird, high up in the sky.
As quiet as a sleeping whale.

Day(Dream) # 3

The nights are the worst.
In the distance the last farms
but nothing is recognizable anymore, not even my own voice.
Nothing, nothing makes sense anymore –
things suddenly seems dangerously close and recorded.
The water in the ditches, the wind through the knee-high grass
the porous earth and that horse over there
I think it's a horse.
I do up my laces to buy time.
In my rucksack: water, food, dry clothes
a handful of bullets my mobile still has a signal.
I barely reflect, barely breathe.
As though I were dead but I'm bursting with life.
If I'm thirsty, I drink.
If I'm tired, I sing a song
my mother always used to sing to me.
From above this might look like running away
but everything is dark from above.
A few kilometres at the most, I guess
then the sun will come up
gleaming, clear light all around.

‘Alfred Schaffer is an intriguing case: a Dutch poet and essayist who has made his home in South Africa. There would seem to be no idealist adherence involved in this decision, but no exile or any sense of fleeing a stagnant Europe either. And yet, he doesn’t come across as being adrift. Maybe the logic is entirely domestic. Maybe there is no logic.

His poems reflect this to an extent. They move with ease between several worlds. One is aware of focus because the poetry is rooted, clearly situated, invoking geographical and historical and political spaces, one is conscious of what is being looked at and described and sometimes transformed by the description - and yet it is deceptive. The artistry is never obtrusive, nor even obvious, but the poems are resonant and unbounded. They coherently straddle disparate and incongruous worlds, periods, settings, and move seamlessly between private and communal spaces. The effect is that one is drawn into the powerful processes of poetry establishing its own reality.’

Breyten Breytenbach

This brochure is part of the Contemporary Dutch Poets-series, featuring a choice of today’s most interesting poets from the Netherlands. The series is published by the Dutch Foundation for Literature. If you would like to receive more information or other brochures from this series, please contact:

Thomas Möhlmann
t.moehlmann@letterenfonds.nl

Alfred Schaffer and over eighty other interesting Dutch poets are featured, with heaps of information and poems in English translation, at the Dutch Domain of: www.poetryinternationalweb.net

Rights

De Bezige Bij
Van Miereveldstraat 1
NL – 1071 DW Amsterdam
The Netherlands
t +31 20 305 98 10
f +31 20 305 98 24
info@debezigebij.nl
www.debezigebij.nl

Schaffer Abroad

Alfred Schaffer’s poems have been translated and published in anthologies and reviews in Afrikaans, English, French, German, Macedonian, Turkish, Indonesian and Swedish. In 2013 Protea Bookhouse published *Kom in, dit vries daar buite*: Schaffer’s selected poems, translated into Afrikaans by Daniel Hugo.

Nederlands
letterenfonds
dutch foundation
for literature

Postbus/PO Box 16588
1001 RB Amsterdam
t +31 (0)20 520 73 00
f +31 (0)20 520 73 99
post@letterenfonds.nl
www.letterenfonds.nl

visiting address
Nieuwe Prinsengracht 89
1018 VR Amsterdam

One of the most talented Dutch poets of his generation, **Alfred Schaffer** (b. 1973) debuted in 2000 with the collection *His Rise in the Suburbs*. His second book, *Vagrants* (2002) was nominated for the prestigious VSB prize. After that came *No Hands Before Your Eyes* (2004), *Foam* (2006) and *Cage* (2008). After winning the Jo Peters poetry prize for his first collection, he was nominated for the C. Buddingh' prize and went on to win the Hugues C. Pernath prize, the Ida Gerhardt poetry prize and the Jan Campert prize.

Schaffer grew up in The Hague, the son of Dutch-Aruban parents. In 1996, he moved to Cape Town, South Africa to continue his studies and met his future wife. He returned to the Netherlands in 2005 and worked as an editor in Dutch publishing before moving back to South Africa in 2011. He currently works as a lecturer at Stellenbosch University.



**'Passionate poetry about a legendary tyrant. [...]
A collection with great imaginative power.'**
Peter Swanborn in *de Volkskrant* (****)