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that is  
well put  
can I go now?  
*Elmar Kuiper*

# Voices from the North (of Holland)

Four Contemporary Frisian Poets

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Explaining things, that's something  
we're all very good at.  
*Nyk de Vries*

In Friesland, the most northwestern province of the Netherlands, everyone speaks Dutch, but a large portion of the population also speaks Holland's second official language: Frisian. For writers and poets using Frisian, the potential readership is limited, as no more than approximately half a million people consider it their mother tongue. But the sensuality and powerful imagery of the language, as well as its unique idioms and humour, have an appeal that refuses to tailor itself to practical considerations. For many poets, Frisian is simply the best language to express what they want to say.

There have always been Frisian poets who reached a Dutch audience, but over the last decades the number of Frisian poets being translated and read in Dutch shows a remarkable rise. The four poets selected here, each with a distinctive personal voice, publish both in Frisian and in Dutch.

The poet-performer is easily recognisable in the resonant, rhythmic poems of **Tsead Bruinja** (1974), and the poet often tells stories about earlier times. At the same time, there are also a great many lines that point towards the present in his poems, which bear witness to a strong social involvement. His bilingualism finds eloquent expression in 'Bed', one of his magnificent love poems. This poem plays with the two languages in which the poet lives and loves.

Music is an important source of inspiration for the poetry of **Albertina Soepboer** (1969), as is the empty and – in her poetry – often somewhat depressing landscape in which she grew up. Her poems display great poise in their construction – in *De fjoerbidders* (2003) they are even all made up of four stanzas of two lines each. The

style of the poems in the later collections is slightly more subdued, but always rich and telling. In 'Pigeons', for example, the sugar (refinery) contrasts cynically with the narrator's experience in a rainy atmosphere.

The poems of **Elmar Kuiper** (1969) provide ample evidence of originality, nerve and a strong associative flair. They deal with large themes: longing, love and death, power and impotence. In his most recent Frisian collection, *Granytglimkes* (2011), the poems are somewhat more accessible than in his previous work, with still rich but perhaps less fanciful images and with emotions that are simultaneously personal and universal. The poet displays his vulnerability and uncertainty towards a loved one in the poem 'closed', which begins with a beautiful image of the evening that smears a layer of lipstick on the clouds.

Musician/writer **Nyk de Vries** (1971) wrote two novels before starting to publish poetry. As a poet, he applies himself to 'prose poems': poems in the form of super-short stories. These poems have a distinct, apparently realistic, but sometimes almost fairy-like and even uncanny feel to them. The absurd or intriguing punch line is characteristic of these poems. The writer succeeds every time in drawing the reader into a small world and, via an unexpected turn, leaving him there with a smile and/or a look of surprise.

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For information on rights,  
Dutch poetry and translation  
grants please contact:

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#### Advisor Poetry

Thomas Möhlmann  
t.moehlmann@letterenfonds.nl

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#### Advisor Frisian Literature

Alexandra Koch  
a.koch@letterenfonds.nl

---

#### Text

Jelle van der Meulen,  
Thomas Möhlmann

---

#### Photos

Pieter van der Meer,  
Tineke de Lange

Friese Provincie  
PO Box 20120  
NL-8900 HM Leeuwarden  
+31 58 2925925  
provincie@fryslan.nl  
www.fryslan.nl

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

Tsead Bruinja  
Albertina Soepboer  
Elmar Kuiper  
Nyk de Vries

Four Contemporary Frisian Poets

Tsead Bruinja

Three poems,  
*translated by David Colmer  
& Tsead Bruinja*

Girl Under the Apple Tree

Bed

Why Isn't Anyone Taking Care of the Horses?

Taken from: *Gers dat allêst laket*, (Grass That's Already Laughing; 2005)  
and *Stofsûgersjongers* (Vacuum Cleaner Singers; 2013).

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**Tsead Bruinja** (b. 1974) is an Amsterdam based poet, writing both in Frisian and Dutch. He made his debut in 2000 with the Frisian-language collection *De wizers yn it read* (The Meters in the Red). More recent titles include *Overwoekerd* (Overgrown; 2010), *Stofsûgersjongers* (Vacuum Cleaner Singers; 2013), and *Binnenwereld, buitenwijk* (Inner World, Suburb; 2015) Bruinja frequently hosts literary events, teaches Creative Writing at the ArtEZ Art Academy in Arnhem, and compiles

anthologies – including the famous *Kutgedichten* (Twat Poems) and *Droom in Blauwe regenjas - nieuwe Friese dichters* (Dream in a Blue Raincoat - New Frisian Poets). Bruinja has performed on many international stages, among others in Nicaragua, Germany, Ireland, Indonesia, Scotland, Zimbabwe and Macedonia. His poems have been translated and published in reviews and anthologies in France, Germany, Iraq, Nepal, Slovenia, South-Africa, the UK and the USA.

## Girl Under the Apple Tree

the good earth that turns towards the sun  
and the night untangling from its branches

the apples

the fine light hair on her goose bumps

the night between her breasts  
and the book on her lap

I had a face  
half-done

and

wanted

to read along

singer with lime on his claws  
who can't come tumbling  
out of the tree

and doesn't catch any birds

a bag of blood without hands

in his head  
a new silence

on his body  
a new pair of hands

## Bed

the names you use  
for food cutlery and crockery on the table  
are not the first names

which I learnt for food cutlery and crockery  
and when you touch me you sometimes touch  
a completely different part of me

than where my sister  
would pinch me after I'd teased her  
or where my mother would put a little  
more effort in washing me

we sleep in the same bed  
but yours is shorter  
and mine sounds more  
like the bleating of a goat

your father and mother  
your grandfathers and mothers  
they are called something else

they never cuddled up to you  
gave you a kiss  
or a good wash

we live in the same world  
I cuddle up to you  
give you a kiss

for those things we use  
the same names no

your bed and kisses  
are growing longer  
every year

## Why Isn't Anyone Taking Care of the Horses?

there are too many mariachis playing in this street  
songs about women who come women who go a leaking tap  
there are too many mariachis playing

there are too many phone numbers stored in our mobiles  
numbers and messages from the dead we don't dare to delete  
too many numbers

and not enough bottles of wine to keep our horses  
trotting up and down the boulevard all night  
that's why I'm switching to rum  
there are too many people

there are not enough cages with canaries  
for the mineshafts we still have to go down  
my mother tries to revive one on the kitchen table  
rubbing butter on its beak

there are too many halls and too many paths  
one will be the end of us

there are too many mariachis playing in this street  
last night the government fell back home  
but I was talking to you about your sister  
about my sister and about the horses  
there are not enough ministers

there are too many presidents  
the world is one big poetry festival  
with some poets much more important than others  
take away their canaries and hoist them flag and all  
up onto their burning horses

because there are too many jesuses on this ship  
too many sails

and not enough water for them to walk on

why isn't anyone walking the horses?  
rolls off your purple tongue

and coming from my purple lips  
why isn't anyone running with our horses?

and why wasn't there anybody nobody at all  
when our backs were up against the wall  
no dead no ministers no presidents or canaries

to save our sisters and glasses?

there are too many mariachis in this street tonight

and I don't have enough on me  
to help pay the school fees  
for all of their kids

Albertina Soepboer

Four poems,  
*translated by Susan Massotty*

Candy Says  
December is the Coolest Month  
I'll Never Be Your Maggie May  
Pigeons

Taken from: *De fjoerbidders* (The Fire Worshippers; 2003).

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**Albertina Soepboer** (b. 1969) grew up in the small Frisian town of Holwerd, before moving to Groningen where she first studied Romance language and cultures, then Frisian Literature. She has written plays, song lyrics and prose, but is best known for her poems, which she writes both in Frisian and Dutch. Her debut in Dutch, *De hengstenvrouw* (The Stallion Woman; 1997), comprises of her first two Frisian collections, published in 1995 and 1997. By now, nearly fifteen books of poems have appeared, either in Frisian,

Dutch or both. From a mythical and lyrical voice, she gradually developed into a more condensed and cryptical poet. In her most recent collection, *Bezonken* (Settled; 2014), she seems to have traded the echoes of pop music and the modern era for the more fundamental sounds of land and sea. Over the years, Soepboer has received the Rely Jorritsma Prize for Frisian Literature no less than four times. Some of her poems have appeared in reviews and anthologies in England, Macedonia, Portugal and Germany.

## Candy Says

She glided over the parquet, his little  
princess on the piano, piccola bitchy.

I hung on for dear life, hungrily ate  
his leftover crusts and limp lettuce.

Call me Candy. Whose legs he licked.  
Whose sweet breath he sucked. Who knows.

I plucked her song from the drain, smeared  
spit on the mirrors. Candy says: drop dead.

## December is the Coolest Month

Never before had the moon been freezing cold.  
I bought a pair of royal-blue mittens for him.

Our first day he played Satie. Pure happiness,  
a windowsill, ten fingers flying through space.

Hands darted over ebony and ivory, glinted off  
ice crystals. The tone not just set but made.

The way we stood there, later, by the window.  
White, winter music we were, and warm too.

## I'll Never Be Your Maggie May

Ditchwater by the refinery, white light  
when I woke in the morning and saw it.

The spaces that never quite got filled,  
notes whirling on strong westerly winds.

Not thirst not hunger not him not when  
I had scrubbed the half moons clean.

But ditchwater, like raindrops and red  
sorrel, dusty beside the railroad track.

## Pigeons

If only we hadn't rushed headlong into things,  
the notes of our score might still be intact.

The requiem blew right off the high-rise, a stray  
flock of birds from the wires by the sugar refinery.

Entwined, we caressed in a single fleshless breath.  
A house of stone filled to overflowing, then burst.

It began to rain again. I listened to two pigeons  
cooing in our cul-de-sac and fed them the tears.

Elmar Kuiper

Four poems,  
*translated by Susan Massotty  
& Willem Groenewegen*

For Heaven's Sake  
Überwald\*  
closed  
not welcome

\*) Previously published in *Poetry Wales*; 2007  
Taken from: *Hertbyt* (2004) and *Granytglimkes* (2011).

Among many things, **Elmar Kuiper** (b. 1969) is a trained psychiatric nurse, visual artist, playwright, film maker and a poet. From his first Frisian poems in *Hertbyt* (2004) right up to his upcoming Dutch collection *Ruimtedier* (2016), Kuiper seems able to combine humour and sincerity, absurdism and sensitivity,

in a completely unique and personal way. With his intense and sometimes slightly weird poems, and his deadpan performance, he was a revelation on many national and international stages, including Scotland's Poetry Festival StAnza and the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam.

## For Heaven's Sake

They imprisoned a bird  
gave wings to  
a dog and a horse.

They fired questions at  
listened blankly to  
a bird

until the sound

died out.

They reached a verdict  
said: for heaven's sake dog  
for heaven's sake horse

sing

like a bird

chirp

now that you can fly.

## Überwald

to come in Überwald. that's what I want!  
my rod becomes erect it reeks  
of this primeval forest when I thrust spill seed  
the spigot rinses the drain  
laps up lost children.

do fruit trees grow in Unterwald?  
are there spring buds bearing my name  
do scheisse guys with bare limbs lop off  
the suckers climbing feverishly  
toward the light? who knows.

to come in Überwald. that's what I want!  
on a schöne day I'll pull like mad  
on my dick. that's a promise.  
the sewer is an indifferent S.O.B. accepting  
my modest wads without a fuss.

the children are lost  
forever but Unterwald trees  
sprout with juicy green mouths  
and shout reborn wir sind wieder  
reborn and verdammt noch mal

my rod leaps to attention again!

closed

the evening smears a layer  
of lipstick on the clouds

I can't talk now  
you have to leave

where do you want to go?

if I wrap my arms  
around you

if I let you go now

you will lightly touch the swift  
that skims across the summerhouses

the night just touches on the stars  
the moon is French toast before bedtime

that is  
well put

can I go now?

don't touch me  
don't touch on me

I can't talk now

not welcome

if I am not welcome in the clouds  
because my spirit wants to stay on earth

then hammer a fence around the verse camp  
and let my body be body

if another spirit punishes me by labouring on a sentence  
then let it make sense

that I worthily  
bump and bash as a yearling bull

hah! that the blood  
rushes to my head

if I ridicule the clouds  
because my spirit wants to be with the worms

then dig a hole for my body  
bury my body and let the body be body

Nyk de Vries

Four poems,  
*translated by David Colmer  
& Nyk de Vries*

Progress  
Pantheon  
Lois Lester  
Carnival

Taken from: *Motorman* (2007) and *De dingen gebeuren omdat ze rijmen*  
(The Things Happen Because They Rhyme; 2011).

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Nyk de Vries (b. 1971) was born in Friesland, read history at Groningen University, and currently lives in Amsterdam. He played in several bands and published two novels before his first collection of prose poems, *Motorman* (2006), came out. Five years later, a second load followed: *De dingen gebeuren omdat ze rijmen* (The Things Happen Because They Rhyme). His

poems rarely count over 120 words (De Vries: 'Well, none of them ever reaches 170. Unless it really is a damn good one'), and they matter-of-factly tell tiny stories from an absurd and twisted universe. Or maybe it's just the narrator being a bit eccentric. Either way, on paper as well as on stage, De Vries leaves his audience wondering *wtf* just happened.

## Progress

A small group was passing through the street with Bibles in their hands. My father was standing next to me, grinning. He said, "Those people still believe in God." He probably stopped to think about what he'd just said. The word "still" implied progress. "Those people still believe in God." It suggested levels of increasing insight. My father sniffed and mumbled, "We still believe in progress." Silently we watched the slight figures until the small group had disappeared around the corner. Then I looked to the side and behind me. There was no one there.

## Pantheon

We were in Rome with a group from our village and of course we visited the Pantheon. Some of my father's former workmates were there too, tradesmen from Sikkema Builders of Veenwouden, nice guys. One of them wandered over to me, pointed up and said that he thought it was very clever of the ancient Romans, building it up so high and beautifully rounded like that with their level of technology. He half glanced at his fellow building workers, coughed and said, "Course nowadays we throw a place like this together in no time."

## Lois Lester

I met Lois Lester in 1956 and realised immediately that he was a strange character. We were walking through Chinatown when he pulled out a dagger and plunged it straight into his stomach. He wasn't dead, but we had to rush to hospital like mad things. There I spent almost the entire evening talking to Sister Anna and hardly a fortnight later we were married. What else is there to say? Why wait any longer for the one you love when she's sitting right next to you?

## Carnival

A dark car drove up and a small girl dressed as a clown got out. She took her bag and crossed the schoolyard. But at school it turned out that carnival wasn't until next week. The girl was the only one with face paint and she cried inconsolably all morning. Around three her mother came back to pick her up. She was shocked to hear what had happened and, with tears in her eyes, related in detail everything that had gone wrong that morning. She'd probably have done better to keep it to herself. Explaining things, that's something we're all very good at.

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.

For additional information and other Dutch and Frisian poets in English translation, please also visit the Dutch domain of Poetry International Web: <http://poetryinternationalweb.net>

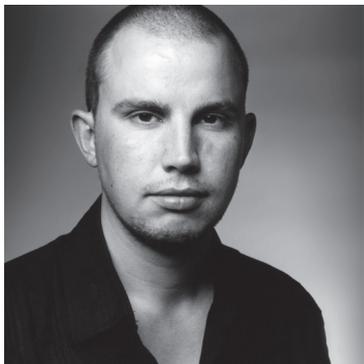
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For publishers intending to publish a work by a Frisian writer in translation, the same arrangements apply as for Dutch literature: for poetry, subsidies are available to cover up to 100 per cent of the translation costs. Not just the poetry in this brochure, but any other literary publications by Frisian poets qualify for such a grant. Applications will be judged based on the quality of the source text, the translation and the publisher. For information about translators please contact the foundation.

Specifically in case of a publication of Dutch and Frisian poetry in translation, a foreign publisher or magazine editor can also apply for additional financial assistance.

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**I plucked her song from the drain,  
smearsd spit on the mirrors.  
Candy says: drop dead.**  
*Albertina Soepboer*



Tsead Bruinja



Albertina Soepboer



Elmar Kuiper



Nyk de Vries

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**the night between her breasts  
and the book on her lap**  
*Tsead Bruinja*