

Tomas Lieske
*An uncertain but
enchanted
adventure*

Contemporary Dutch Poets

‘A collection that cherishes, as a fragile egg, the mystery that keeps us going, and which paints the excitement and joy of love in an unparalleled way in every poem.’
VSB Poetry Prize Jury about *How to Recognize your Lover*

Tomas Lieske made his debut at the age of forty-four with the poetry collection *The Ice Generals* (1987), but quickly expanded his sphere of activity to cover a broad literary front. Having maintained a poetry chronicle for *Tirade* magazine, he began to publish successful novels and short story collections. But poetry remained his core business. In his poems, imagination and the unutterable play a significant role but, all the same, Lieske is also a matter-of-fact poet who regards metaphysics and mysteries as human projections. His remarks on dreams are typical of his attitude: 'They gnaw at your fingernails, speak a language, bring good luck/ although they don't even exist.'

With captivating images and extraordinary use of language he constructs his own unique world, which you see developing on paper but which also develops within the reader. Lieske transports his readers on an uncertain but enchanting adventure. Through his exceptional manner of depiction and his wayward use of language, with expressions such as 'brackish raking slacks' or a 'trout-fungic carpet', he is one of the most exuberant figures in Dutch poetry, someone who continues the legacy of Gerrit Achterberg and Lucebert in his own specific way. Originally he wrote mostly broad, dispersive poetry; later poems are more sober. In the meantime, essential matters remain prominent: he is not primarily interested in everyday news and the rumour of society and politics, but his poems are replete with love and pain, with sexuality and animality, with

human nature and magic. With all these elements, his work retains a playful and occasionally absurd character, a quality in which you can recognize the theatre-maker who plays all possible roles. A person who calls a poem about telephone sex 'Annunciation', demonstrates that he is capable of blending registers and cultures like a literary alchemist.

'Tomas Lieske has plenty to offer: a fully-fledge voice, sophisticated poems, sensitive descriptions and pure nerve.'

Nikki Dekker in *8weekly*

'You enter a world that was not there previously, a world in which a delicate equilibrium exists between anxiety and love, between horror and beauty.'

Bert van Weenen in *Meander*

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:

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Tomas Lieske 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.org

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Lieske abroad

A number of Lieske's novels appeared in several European countries. His poems have been translated and published in anthologies and reviews in English, French, German and Turkish.

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Tomas Lieske

Fifteen poems,
translated by
Willem Groenewegen

The Drunk
Landlord

We All Choose a Colour
Take the Garden Snail

Nicolaus Copernicus
René Descartes

Rien ne va plus
The Collier's Faith of My Mother
A Watchmaker to the Scattered Parts
The Seducer to the Pregnant Teen

Consoling Voice at my Beloved's Burial
Lifting up her Hippopotamus
Lucifer
Woodblock. Gravestone
Weipoort

Taken from: *Een tijger onderweg* (A Tiger along the Way; 1989), *Grondheer* (Groundsman; 1993), *Stripping* (2002), *Hoe je geliefde te herkennen* (How to Recognize your Lover; 2006) and *Haar nijlpaard optillen* (Lifting up her Hippopotamus; 2012)

The Drunk

With all its crystal and ice and prismatic beauty
the carafe awaits. With its white spots and
corroded left-overs the canal traverses the streets
of my youth. Like a tattered advert
the diary of my life bobs up and down,
the meetings fade, the numbers, names.

Your face is first sketched flat on the pane
and then all juicy again, torn from its decency.
The nails grow into the palms of your hands, you bark,
and yet, however much I try to reason, keep the peace,
how will I use your pelt, your slanted eyes,
both your legs jut out like pegs, squarely from a skirt?

My gambit phrased with needless cruelty,
my forgetting your Egyptian face,
my impotence when fishing my semantemes
from the lake of stomach acid,
my adept and rather haughty fall,
the rams' horn trumpets and the choirs in my head,
the acoustic cutting stylus of your voice,
while on an almost fully saturated raft,
I float past a new development.

The incompetence and bitterness I spread about me,
the fragments that have crept into my body,
the stalks of glass you stand on in the morning,
where both my memories and I hang out to dry
and in the hall the stains on the wall,
the paintings warped with pre-drink pints.

Landlord

Why do I find you attractive? I listen at your door.
I let your clothes run through my hands when you have left
this house again with youthful jumps. The skin
around your hips, your scent, your rolling pace.

Everything was granted you on loan. The space
your soul marked out in chalk-stripe
so your body can take shelter, which you converted
into a predator's cage; a familiar path worn into
the rug between the sink and wall.

The pipes I lay to capture your breath
and keep for years; the wires of steel
I tighten to soften your fall. The walls
I shovel out so I can see you. The bowls
I place to tempt you back into your cage.
The skirts that stand about your kindled legs.

Look, I quietly sit in front of your room; on the level
with the risk. With eyesight improved, a longer
and more sensitive pellicle;
with membranes taught and suckers
contracted; with feathered ears.

We all choose a colour

At first it's a sound from strange places, like ground-ice,
like the stench of an unseen glutton leering at your neck,
then a word in the corner of your trouser pocket,
it sleeps against the warmth of your thigh,
unnoticed it rests in your hands: life.
You add a lick of paint, replace it with an incantation.

With a symbol in armour, which you can fight.
You are a cheerful knight of your time,
you take the field and measure your lance against another's,
then notice your insufficient length. Your visor
grates, your glove's at home, your horse is two legs short.

You step into a cage, you ogle the audience,
stretch out, show your breasts – then for that silent fur
in the corner: a tiger on its back, its legs
extended in turn, the warm skin of the armpit slack.

If only life were a chamber of quartets
a guilt-free dream of former loves,
if only it were smooth as lacquered litchi stones.

And yet you feel more like a soaking tennis ball
in a Doberman's jaws by the ferry.

The paint flakes off and sticks to your moistened palm.

Take the garden snail

Is it edible then, like its satisfied kin?
Is it also killed by salt, before the seasoned butter?

Snails are travellers, their bag of organs
tied to their backs. A filling so rich that mantle and sac
fit the shell exactly. Between the walls
the calcium spikes and crystal stalks to stir the food.
They're on the road, existing only of shell,
eyes and foot. Pilgrims with a forgotten goal.

What could I say to cheer you up?
They, the ramblers are aware of profit and loss.
Their shells are sold like jewellery around the neck
of small, decisive women. Currency, is what
they have become and symbol for death
and survival. Are eaten and their shells
employed to store oil. They served
in strange brass bands. Their most secret
mission to deliver purple to
the Roman emperors. The smallest
show immense transparency:
mother-of-pearl miniature palaces
quiver at the first footfall. Gelatine
body, house of glass.
With goo they glue their loved ones
and shoot their arrows sensitively
into the other. You yield, you
are my garden snail. I taste and aim
my arrow at your sweetest parts. No salt,
not even a tip. I use my front one to lick you.

Nicolaus Copernicus

He reasoned the rattling sun to silence.
He declared the horses of light a fabrication.
He dismissed the worn-out light god.
He burned the wheels and axles of the sun
with irredeemable fire.
He gave the earth momentum, let the verdant water world
revolve. Had he offended God, the way they thought,
who was the light and source of all light, of day
and night and of that cheated, unmanned sun?

It was once written that 'I saw an angel standing in the sun'.
Then that angel took shape as a magnet with furious arms
that bring forth storms once every eleven
years and with wings like tubular arches
stretching out for thousands of miles.
God is not a jockey with a light source on his back;
the blue sky is no Circus Maximus.
God is a focus of light-emitting memories
in curved space, a scorched field
of smells. His angels are vents of gas,
poles of incomprehensible magnetism,
the keepers of divine light
and the miracle of darkness.

René Descartes

He let someone else cut into the muscles.
The ox fell. Didn't that fall dispel all that was ox?
He stuck out the eyeball, washed the bulbous fruit
and lifted it up in his hand. How much ox kept lowing
in this trembling eye? He peeled off the layers
behind the retina to see how the light came in.

The light of the Thirty Years' War.
The light that shone across the living and the dead.
The light that could prove God's existence.
The eye lay in his hands as an injured onion.

Did that used water bag, blood-stained,
leave an image he should trust? He saw
the world projected,
the ox's deed of looking,
the mirror of God's senses,
the scratches of a knife behind an eye,
the muscles needed in wartime,
a good insight into human life.
But no morale. No trace, no tale.
Of either the light, or of the gloomy pain.

Rien ne va plus

Nothing counts now, neither the daily
purifying water rituals, nor
the toxic infections that threaten me or my children,
nor the obligation to sow, nor the fear
as we climb the grubby rock arch high above the river.
The hand that mangles your clothes, the bee
that lands on the hot corn cob between your teeth,
the muddy footsteps across your bleached sheets,
nothing counts now, the shell of significance has softened
compared to what you expect; when exactly
cannot be determined, what exactly is not known to you.

The collier's faith of my mother

What she believed was clear and beamed with simplicity,
a blissful flow imprinted upon her and that she hankered after.

God's finger let the sun revolve around the earth,
the angels filled the heavenly concert halls according to contract.

The souls of the deceased held tight to shoes,
to last worn clothes, to the edges of beds.

She believed in a crowded heaven where, as at a reception,
too many people had been invited without there being a row.

Gods, angels and saints respected their hierarchies
without a fuss. She believed in a small god

in a donkey jacket, a short farmer's coat, in a goddess
who ragged herself up with blue-and-white cloth,

in a series of household gods, private saints that were to help her
in case of toddlers falling ill, of fires, of money misplaced

and mumbling her own priestess's chants
she arranged the statues of these penates, the visible jumble

that faith had caused in her head, the colliers
who tramped around inside and sang their endless litanies.

But all the saints, all the gods, all the angels had the face
of her husband whom she loved and she rejected those who

lectured her on faith and who ascribed an important rattle
to themselves and who did not resemble the one she loved.

A watchmaker to the scattered parts

You tiny, crazy, fingernail-thick and heavenly bright-lit parts that at a rock-reel gear-swing pace must clutch between the teeth of the wheel but have escaped the movement.

You copper-plated, longitudinally grooved levers, which all grind time together, try to hide in cylinders, continually hammer on the dials of the clock.

You fierce, tough shimmer-damsels with your tinny glow and your teeth that bite into my fat fingers and dig into my hand and my escapement and my pivot wheel, my revolving works.

Oh you tiny, rotten wretches, repair old times.
Swing according to my wishes,
balance under my magnifier,
oscillate to my content,
and clutch.

The seducer to the pregnant teen

Here on the edge of the concrete animal fountains
I splatter the water, till the splashes cascade against the summerhouse.

In the summerhouse we will inhabit, I shine the windows
and radiate the warmth that hangs submerged along the walls.

By the walls two black horses before the calèche I sweat
the fragrant vapour that charms the flies that swarm the hydrangea's.

The hydrangea's in the white-gold vases I drench in water
with a craving till their blue-pink umbels reflect as if in silver.

I silver the black-and-white argentine accented service
from which you pour the tea and that throws light spots on your shadow.

The zebra-coloured shadow of the symmetrical wooden shutters
I stripe across your body that I discover under your white clothes.

Between the white clothes butterfly across the armchairs, the
abat-jours,
I bare your belly and your velour breasts and our united we

us, the two new people whom we'll be,
I will begin and let me start by pouring myself out to you.

Consoling voice at my beloved's burial

I am the compass of the migratory bird.

I am the shape of the world, the coastline
the currents and the winds, the charge
between the poles. I am the light of the stars
the rise of the sun, the fullness
of the moon, the dome that everybody
has to cross while beating their wings.
I am the mathematics calculating
the precise angle, the dynamics that control
both momentum and streamline, the geographer
who recognises every bend.

Do not take heed of the fires, the plumes of smoke
the revolts, the banjirs and the siltstone.

Avoid the toxic waste dump, distrust the temptation
of the wasteland, see the fields, how full
they are and count the sheaves. Play deaf
to the know-it-alls, the demagogues
the discontented, the church emissaries, the announcers,
abhor the clairvoyants.

But follow the needle of existence and trust in
the horizon that will unfold.

Lifting up her hippopotamus

I am the angel that alleviates the raging
bends the hurricane round.

For years
a glass city surrounded her on all sides
In one night all the glass was shattered.

Stroke the shards from her
black hair, save her will to live.

After the funeral put everything away.
Her hands that hold the toys so tightly
free them again and set them in motion.

Quench her thirst after only tainted water
keep the dead birds at a distance
sprinkle the cracked roads with cinders.
A warm cover when the sun sets
a tent to live in and to pray
a fire against the belly-crawling vermin
a narrative to structure thoughts.

Close her eyes, tighten her rhythm
tilt her limbs on the hard ground,
lift up her hippopotamus.

Lucifer

I am caught between the sun and moon.

Between the sun of Troy and Achilles
and the moon of 'Are you cold, love,
are your veins flowing steadier and heavier?'

The sun above the bull in the bleeding
arena, the moon of the midsummer night's dream.

The sun above the contentious banners
the chanted slogans, the barricades.
The moon of the stagnant water
of the stock-still peeking pike
that notices most animals are asleep
but can do nothing else
than lie there with tensed muscles
in its hideaway; its eyes are
slowly rolling into an endless stare
and see nothing else.

Until
in this unrippled, silver-green world
prey as slow as a vitreous body
swims into view and wonders whether
this danger is imaginary or true.

Woodblock. gravestone

They have let loose a carpentry workshop on him:
clothes off and on the tenterhook, hands in the vice bench
and chop chop the mortise chisel, his back with the bradawl

We could not reach him, he was hiding
on the other side of the wood, behind the riveting stake.

We did not hear him scream because we were staring
into the skies in concentration and tracing the hobby falcon
bracing itself to pierce a young swallow with the spikes
of its claws.

Or we cast our horoscopes
to learn when we were to wash ourselves
when we were to dig up the dollars
when we were to throw the bars of soap out of the window.

He was known as an opponent and the regime
deployed a guard. Not that he would ever
move again and certainly wouldn't escape
but to prevent us from finding evidence.

I do not even know in which country we are
in which part of the world, under which secret police.

There are slums, fishermen, videos. There is a Trojan
horse, a wartime navy. But you find those everywhere.

Weipoort

For centuries, the turf cutter has come every night.

Cautiously, with boards
tied to his feet, leaning on an immense
spade he squelches across the wet earth. With every step
he sucks his greasy-sounding, flat wooden foot
from the grass.

Weipoort night.

Behind the farm the high water surface
in front of the building every flow is lower, even the water
level is raised by the visitor; he forces
the ditch into a course and lets the surface rise.
He lets the water well up. Fish beat
their tails out of their tracksuits and ants
snorkel round with flippers. A curlew
startles in its sleep, flies up and begins
to sing its praises.

Night in Weipoort

and behind the hedgerows and banks we hope
the turf cutter will call at our door, raise us
from our lowly dreams and thoughts
will murder our sleep, let the white waifs
dance about the field, control and
particularise our life, lay down the law
on our proud soil to beat the water out.

Note: Weipoort is a hamlet in the Dutch province of Zuid-Holland, near Zoeterwoude. The entire section entitled 'Nacht. Polder' (Night. Polder), from which this poem is taken, is devoted to Zuid-Holland's grasslands and watery areas. 'Weipoort' as word literally means 'Fieldgate'.



Photo: Allard de Witte

Tomas Lieske (b. 1943) was raised in a suburb of The Hague. His home surroundings have played an unmistakable role in his work. He studied Dutch Language and Literature and Theatre Studies in Leiden and taught at a secondary school. From the eighties onward he published in literary reviews and has written countless novellas, collections of poetry and novels for which he has received a number of major prizes. For one of his best known novels, *Franklin*, about an outcast who manages to survive on optimism and imagination, he received the Libris Literature Prize 2001, and for his fifth poetry collection *How to Recognize your Lover* (2006), he was awarded the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize 2007.

‘Lieske’s universe resembles that of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In crystal-clear phrases with surprising word combinations, the poet tells short stories about yearning, adultery, power and alienation.’

Piet Gerbrandy in *De Groene Amsterdammer*