

Ester Naomi Perquin
*Promising
young poet*

Contemporary Dutch poets

**‘The tone, the clarity and the eye
for the ordinary in an “ordinary”
form are very effectively conveyed.’**
Rieuwert Krol in Meander

Ester Naomi Perquin made her début in 2007, after completing the poetry course at Amsterdam Creative Writing School, with the collection *Servetten halfstok* (Napkins at Half Mast), a series of striking, tasteful images presented in an accessible style. She revealed herself clearly as writing in the tradition of post-war poets of small-scale happiness and small-scale sorrow, like Rutger Kopland and Judith Herzberg, but also showed a more menacing side, for example in the short poem 'At Full Moon', in which a man is shaving and the association with a werewolf pops up: 'and then with a razor/ shaves the wolf from his face.' In other poems too, in which she evokes the image of a young, questing woman full of longings and melancholy childhood memories, she sometimes suddenly throttles the original idea. A typical line is 'I can't stand little lambs'. Sometimes also her images transcend what originally prompted them and take on a slightly surrealistic quality.

You could characterise her work with the phrase 'polite oddity'. That is certainly equally true of her last collection, *Celinspecties* (Cell Inspections), in which her past as a prison officer plays a large part. With an open-minded vision Perquin enters the lives of criminals, losers and lost souls and experiences how multi-faceted life is, even within the confines of a cell: full of dream, love, regret, opportunism.

Free of any moralising she describes how a prisoner still manages to turn life to his advantage: 'you can hold off confessing till a murder's/ been buried: home free, case closed'. Here again that dislike of the all too pretty and obvious: 'I only want to touch bad men.' You could say that with her classical sense of form but fascination with evil, Perquin is pursuing a contemporary version of 'Romantic agony'.

In a climate where many of her contemporaries practise mainly wild and unconstrained forms of poetry, Perquin shows herself a more classical poet, but one who in a subtle way raises the issue of the perverse character of the world and society. No wonder that she is regarded as one of the most promising young female poets of the moment and has already won various prizes.

'That is one of the strengths of this collection: the contrast between behaviour and Perquin's elegant lines.'
Guus Middag in NRC/Handelsblad on Celinspecties

Ester Naomi Perquin

Thirteen poems, *translated by Paul Vincent*

At Full Moon
State Secret
Architects
Survey
The Importance of Being Chicken
The Last Unknown Person
You're the Wrong One
Example
Reunion
Blot
Strangers
Connection
Big Brother

At Full Moon

I can see him, silhouette of
a man in his bathroom window.
By that light he works on apace.

Rubs lather into his cheeks
and then with a razor
shaves the wolf from his face.

State Secret

Oversized bird scrubbed clean by bristles thrusting
high up into the air and
hidden atop the cable, spare,
from which it must suspend this flight.

Concert of unidentified powers,
ruses of clandestine government.
Those girls with their cute skirts and hats?
Silence on board. Or else face the music.

Once aloft, the pressure is so low
all sense – how clumsy, how heavy,
how slow – of gravity is lostww.
What is unknown won't fall.

But who will pay the men whose job it is to pull
the clouds past the wings?
Who will wash their sky-blue overalls?

Architects

Heard today how even as children
they often longed for a town,
built towers along a muddy path
from what was strewn in yards, on ditch banks.

Not one had thought of grimy then,
of vastness all-too-grey in which
we lost tracks, walls
in which no hand yet cleared a view.
No one had yet pressed austere creases
into fronts of commercial leases.

All was still made of water and sand.
So low was the land that dreams
must reach high, the horizon had emptied away –
they stood and watched till the start of their day.

Survey

Do you like to rest during the day and at night make a man happy?
Do you feel depressed at the sight of lavender?
Have you ever thought of a hotel?

Delete: I am not a woman/I am a stupid woman.
In recent years I have felt regret at least
six times. What tends stick to my fingertips
is: gold leaf, paint, tomato juice.

You fit into a suitcase. If you do not fit into a suitcase
how would you describe yourself? How long have you
had weight problems? How often?

If you jump off a bridge, will you still try:

- A) to pinpoint yourself on a map
- B) to drift further and further off
- C) to turn back halfway

Suppose your illness were an animal. If you're healthy the question
counts double. What animal would you rather your illness were not?
N.B.: the bad days must be counted too.

Are you more frightened of the outcome than before?
State whose questions these are, according to you.

The Importance of Being Chicken

We've almost finished the plucking. Naked birds
lie gleaming at us, even under their feathers they're all chicken.

If we were able to eat each other we would taste
different than before, with clothes on – you and I are what we wear
much more fully than they are and have been so good at it for years
that it hurts us, nakedness.

We have a last look at what's lying there – again and again
they assemble themselves before our eyes, all those elegant,
relevant bones, recognisable remains, every scrap
they owned butchered, there's always
something left over that we want to be ourselves: always
recognisable as one and the same face
on ever-changing heads.

The Last Unknown Person

So you've lived in secret, were born
underground, have never been in the picture.

So you lived in places where no one came to look,
no dog roamed desolately, nose close to the ground,
you were never tempted to
stroke anyone in full view.

You didn't utter any well-turned phrases,
did not show a careful face – how,
if we did not see you, did you live?

Were you hiding from someone somewhere?
Did you see it the other way round – did we vanish
as long as you had no part in us?

You can't leave the way you arrived,
in the dark, as a secret. Sit as
you are, and we will zoom in.

This is your chance to be present.
YOU'RE THE WRONG ONE
You were always the wrong one
and, indisputably, you still are.

You're the Wrong One

I don't like love, I never have.
I've stayed with you because I'm so sure.

Gazing into the other's eyes, the one and only,
who always has to do something, leave, move.

With you I knew from the very first day
that it wouldn't work, that after an evening or so's
well-meaning exchanges, goings-on at full moon
it would stop. And it did.

(It stopped, it goes on stopping, each day
less dangerous, more indifferent, tougher.)

The other means Paris, real life,
the people in the ads, the nights and hell.

Perhaps I love you, if inalienably
I still mean this, and guarantee
it forever as well.

Example

In one day you can do it all: fall in love with a man,
smile and scoff at yourself several times, reflect on
the whiteness of your teeth, study your face
as if you're him and look up and see you.

You may find yourself ugly or not and ask yourself out
(kiss somewhere, though at the same time keep your head),
be forgiving towards the circuits you devise
where he lives, works, where he drinks -
lecture yourself on possible,
as yet inchoate indifference.

You may come to regret the day the man
the regret you fell in love with.

It may occur to you: there's no alternative
to this phonily traversed eternity,
reduced to a single day.

Reunion

You're back here now, you get stuck in the hall's fish trap,
funnel-shaped rooms and cupboards, growl like a dog,
tear the wall paper off with your teeth

and if I tried to show you how the house
that slowly closes around your body,
how it was different
before you arrived -

there was oceans of space in the hall, all the rooms
lay open, the cupboards smelled of your cheeks, shaving foam
dried on the brush, a hanging towel bore
the imprint of your chin, you wouldn't believe me.

An ever-narrower form of wanting to know anyway
and at bay you bark loudly to fend me off:
they're in there somewhere,

they're hidden, there are hundreds of them
and they're still there - it's only me, you say then,
you've deliberately forgotten about.

Blot

In the brightest light, under strong milled glass the odd person
displays my monstrous rightness: there it is,

my classy predator – day by day it cowers,
under the nails of the hand that washes it, of the hand

that tries to expel it hatches out, rushes
to its cells for more, nestles itself

as an eternal guest in rooms that can't be found
and stays out of reach. I know how it lives,

from the head-high trunk to the claws that grasp the air
it stalks me, my rightness – and always finds me,
my full-strength enemy, everywhere, life-size.

Strangers

Just as in a photograph in which you're seen from behind
you recognise yourself but because it's unnatural
would rather not be there – so the other

is just as you already think: it's not good to know too much,
secrets symbols reason give you something to do.

Place between yourself/the other a deep sea and dye your hair,
stay inaudible for each attempt at rapprochement, resist
approaches with loud names as unyielding as stone.

Make it fully public and embark upon a war, be
at all times immutable. Don't coincide, be alone.

Connection

The muffling telephone made your voice
even softer than you like to be,
copy, aspire to be.

Oh, for months, you said, those blind doubts
about ringing you. Neither you nor I
was there wholly by chance that night.

Silence. I assess the furious doggedness
with which you rediscover my body
and carry it, drag it there.

If need be, you said, I'll call again tomorrow.
You waffle a bit about an emptiness that's
easily sent awry.

Lay me next to you. Sometimes I still
dream of children of yours, as in a game.
Beautiful faces that cry.

Big Brother

No father or mother to get us down from the trees
for food or sleep, the most climbing-packed summer for years.

No ponytail for me, I tore dresses to shreds,
got my hair tangled in branches – you fetched
scissors and I became a soldier but
the sword was too heavy and I couldn't
lift the shield off the ground.

You shouted, urging me higher – so I climbed and climbed.
Warmth permeated the trees, deep into the night
you lay like an animal on the bottom branch.

No lions or murderers could come.
For a girl, on watch I had excellent sight.

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Perquin Abroad

Perquin's début collection has been translated in to English, German and French. In 2010, her poem 'Staatsgeheim' was translated in all languages of the European Union.

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Ester Naomi Perquin (Utrecht, 1980) grew up in Zierikzee and at present lives in Rotterdam. She worked in the prison service for a while to help fund her studies. Her début, *Servetten halfstok* (Napkins at Half Mast, 2007), was followed by a second collection, *Namens de ander* (On Behalf of the Other; 2009), for which she was awarded the J.C. Bloem Prize. For both collections jointly she also received the prestigious Lucy B. and C.W. Van der Hoogt Prize. 2012 saw the appearance of her striking third collection *Celinspecties* (Cell Inspections).

‘As far as I’m concerned, the poem “At Full Moon” should be chalked on walls, and the poem “Architects”, which seems to be partly pillorying unrestrained building mania, should definitely be made compulsory reading for all kinds of architectural courses. Perquin, a new asset to watch out for...’

Merijn Schipper in Sapsite