

Cool recording of unsettling observations

The poetry of Alfred Schaffer

UNREST. ANXIETY. SUSPICION. CURIOSITY.' This was the young Dutch poet Alfred Schaffer's response to the question as to what motivated him as a poet. Schaffer is rightly regarded as one of the most interesting young poets in the Dutch-language region.

His poems are characterized by the cool, business-like tone with which he records unsettling observations. It is seldom that one idea or one observation is elaborated right to the end. 'It is not my aim to work out a line of coherent thought in a poem,' he says in the same interview. 'Life itself is not coherent, my poetry is oriented toward articulating something of this diffusion.'

He achieves this by describing several fragments and details of scenes and situations. 'You could refer to my poems as "collages". I'm concerned with the experiment with language and significance, with the way in which words influence one another when they are placed in a certain context.' Schaffer provides a snapshot but never an entire panorama. As a consequence, his poems have a strongly alienating effect. They offer the reader little to hold on to in an attempt to formulate a sound interpretation (in the traditional meaning of the word) and thus often evoke a feeling of unease.

Nevertheless, the rapid switch between apparently incoherent fragments does not lead to a kind of non-committal poetry. The procedure applied by the poet does result in a coherent whole. This is not narrative poetry but rather expressive poetry. Although the things described have a positive correlation with our own everyday lives (many lines have even been adopted from everyday language use, including sayings and jargon), Schaffer creates a completely strange and alienating language in his poetry. It is a world in which people are frequently watched or monitored, and one in which it is impossible to clarify the surroundings. It is a world that most resembles a claustrophobic nightmare.

In Schaffer's first two collections, this world is primarily described via various characters who are helpless playthings of events and circumstances. In his oppressive last collection *Geen hand voor ogen*, where the poems have become more austere in their form, the focus is shifted from the characters to the reader (and perhaps the poet himself), so that this confusion and despair are given shape in a very direct manner.



photo Mark Kohn

Alfred Schaffer (b. 1973) made his debut in 2000 with the collection of poems *Zijn opkomst in de voorstad* (His Rise in the Suburb), published by Thomas Rap, for which he received the Jo Peters Poetry Award and a nomination for the C. Buddingh' Award, both of which are prizes for young poets. His second book of poems *Dwaalgasten* (Vagrants), again published by Thomas Rap, 2002, met favourable reviews and was nominated for the VSB Poetry Award. After *Definities en hallucinaties* (Definitions and hallucinations; Perdu) in 2003, his most recent collection *Geen hand voor ogen* (No hand before your eyes) was published by De Bezige Bij in May 2004.

Schaffer is susceptible to the absurd reality in which we live, but does not allow himself to be overawed. Sober and resolute, he pursues his own route, eradicating the humbug, discarding the disorder: he knows where he's going. Alfred Schaffer is already one of the poets who will lead the way in the years to come.

ADRIAAN JAEGGI in *HET PAROOL*

The result is intriguing, entertaining, and draws Schaffer's challenging poetic horizon right in front of the readers' face. With *Vagrants*, Schaffer has proven that he is steadfastly situated between promise and a challenging future.

THE JURY OF THE VSB POETRY AWARD ON
DWAALGASTEN (VAGRANTS)



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Poems by Alfred Schaffer

(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij)

Translated by John Irons

From *Dwaalgasten; Vagrants, 2002:*

The situation as closing time approaches
The parallel universe

From *Geen hand voor ogen; No hand before your eyes, 2004:*

Land as far as the eye can see
The ceremony in sound and image
Looney tunes
Like a fairytale forest, thoroughly scoured
Theory and practice
Excitement and boredom
Time and place
Going, going, gone V
His final movements brought together I – VIII
Accusations
Meeting on the staircase
You haven't said a word yet
The groundwork has been done
The moment will have come one day
Like a river, abandoned in all haste

**Two poems by Alfred Schaffer
from *Dwaalgasten* (Vagrants; Thomas Rap/ De Bezige Bij, 2002)
translated by John Irons**

THE SITUATION AS CLOSING TIME APPROACHES

At the shallow end of the pool a man is blowing
tiny clouds into the evening sky.

A couple of metres off a boy and girl embrace
for the first time – gently chafing with their lower bodies,

they want to dance in a night-club, preferably until morning,
swim towards each other underwater
and clasp each other as they once have seen it in a film.

Or wave and call out to the gawping man,

who suddenly seems to reconsider and pretends to climb
cautiously out of the pool now that the thrashing legs
of the loving couple start assuming all sorts of shapes
in the ever-moving water.

THE PARALLEL UNIVERSE

At that time Superman was known as extremely friendly.

He would greet politely at the breakfast table,
pass the sugar when asked

and enjoy the breathtaking panorama.

He would play old music when making decisions
and afterwards phone his mother.

Until the night the windows of his birthplace were smashed

his balloon face hung like a boy's dream

throughout the town.

He asked: take pity on my situation,

but had to wave his fists

to keep people's attention.

He became The Great Absentee. He would sneak in

and sit on the back row of theatres

and roar for another encore, or grin for minutes on end

at women in the lift via mirrors

and bide his time.

He has done marvels by leaning forward

at unguarded moments

and whispering something into an ear,

by adding moustaches to unknown people's photos

in the scrapbooks he took with him to auditions.

He could actually fly. Whenever he felt bored

he simply rented a couple of comic films.

**A selection of poems by Alfred Schaffer
from *Geen hand voor ogen* (No hand before your eyes; De Bezige Bij, 2004)
translated by John Irons**

LAND AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE

And then the curtain rises, the small word EXIT reassures us.

Once again you concentrate on the wrong things, at a distance you even make me think of someone else. With that cigarette dangling from your mouth, a travel guide in your left hand, your weapon in your right. Suspicious, so

much attention to detail. Is all that reverence in place? How far does your echo carry? Our urge to look exceeds all expectations, but that's nothing for you to worry about, it's not your fault, you standing there like that, the distance exposed: the image can't be thought away.

Was something due to happen? Or is it already over, the finger on the trigger, the convoluting smoke – you think to yourself I can't have done that, I simply *can't* have done that. All that empty suspicion, shaped of the sort of stuff, in a past long-gone, that dreams were made of.

THE CEREMONY IN SOUND AND IMAGE

The first flakes of snow spiralled from the sky like confetti.
Rejoicing everywhere, everywhere the crackle of fireworks,
children stuck their tongues out to taste the cold.

Sleep is a painless exercise in concentration, a wandering
through a house in search of an object, of someone who shouts
I'm here. Sleep is the silent ticking of a clock,

a snowman lingering beneath a tree after a night full of
congratulations, its wobbly upper body frozen fast
to its lower, a tragic protest in a surface ever whiter.

LOONEY TUNES

Two mice
are sitting on a comfortable seat in a first-class compartment.
The older mouse is wearing a terrific hat
pointing out the most important facts to his young friend.

When the ticket collector comes to punch the tickets
the older mouse solemnly heaves a bouquet up from his inner pocket
without interrupting the flow of his explanation for a single moment.

Then, at precisely the right second, the first Red Indians
appear at the window, who, astride great black horses, are chasing
something or someone, trying with might and main to stay in the picture
but with much panache ultimately have to give up.

‘Your tickets, please!’

The speed of the train must once more be terrifying.

LIKE A FAIRYTALE FOREST, THOROUGHLY SCoured

You won't get out again, soft underfoot whichever
way you turned, even with a map you would
probably get lost, it was so quiet here, dark as earth. I am
simply too much my own is all you can think of now,
surrounded on all sides by trees, by sleep, where was the open place
where you sat down, where you admired the murmur of what
seethes and breathes. You haven't gone, quite the reverse,
you belong to a secret, a myth no less – the story
goes that the sea changed colour, each step was one too many,
a pack of hounds was let loose, searching greedily
for your scent, tongues hanging out, something sucks them closer
but you, you know nothing, hey, can you hear that too, but
words seem superfluous and in such a frame of mind you are found.

THEORY AND PRACTICE

What's right lies in the middle, graspable apparently, like a punctured football in a pond, even with a stick you can't

quite reach, a false start will make everything go haywire, the risks are up to you. What can happen to us, what

is it we can't see? The hands are motionless, or don't we want to know just how we're parting with these precious minutes?

It's always hard to start, each start is a disturbance of some rest, an unsighted challenge, a sheer rock face, you climb and climb

until the pattern that you left makes you feel giddy, a jumble of colours. And there you stand. Your hunch was right, that much is clear.

EXCITEMENT AND BOREDOM

The impatience hung almost tangible above the afternoon, a boat
crossed the river. 'Is that still me?' White specks in the water,

with your face turned toward the cold window, the time difference
dulls all drive. What seemed familiar slid past in close rank.

'Where can I get hold of you presently?' What haunts the head
of someone who receives a letter but will never answer,

what was the name of the river, how deep is the sky? So there you
stand with your smart one-liners, you who should know the subtleties.

'I hear you perfectly!' Enough, someone cried repeatedly, that's
enough. Unyielding, releasing. You're in good company.

TIME AND PLACE

‘So it’s true then?’ A small car jolts along a country road,
a quivering focal point, seen out of the corner of an eye, tufts of
cotton wool above the green valley. ‘I see, I see what you can’t see!’
Roaming around and getting lost till a solution would emerge
and if only this could have been made visible: our laborious return,
how late it got, the one-off sharpness of an overwhelming
decor, the dead weight. Pinned down. ‘Now you have to ask what!’
To stand up or keep lying down, lie down or keep standing up,
at night too this strange proliferation refused to stop,
hold on to my hand. ‘Hallo?’ The power of repetition. ‘Hal-lo?’

GOING, GOING, GONE

V

‘What’s the hurry?’ Someone’s been too clever for us, someone
who knows this route like the back of his hand. There’s music in this –
helicopters above the motorway, people panicking, flashing lights,
the cold-blooded score-settling in broad daylight, the blood-stained back seat.
Gnashing of teeth, think about anything just to stay awake.
The many taillights twirl a wheel before your eyes,

who belonged to who, which of us has won? Your bare back
this morning, the blankets kicked aside. Outside the grass was being mown.
Sure you’re alright, you ought to ask me now, soothingly,
with a well-meant smile that makes me long for a bed,
for a goodnight story. Turn those glaring searchlights off,
shut the door. Your jaws agape. No hand before your eyes.

HIS FINAL MOVEMENTS BROUGHT TOGETHER

More slowly than a life passes.

‘It has lasted a long time,’ Nachoem M. Wijnberg

I

With large paces he will measure this enclosed space. Two by four.

Less and less hours in which a wish can be fulfilled.

Much goes well, much goes badly. Without result.

The loss of view approaches irrevocably.

II

From the air cameras keep tabs on his transactions.
He stands still, has a chat (no this is not a joke),
he greets politely and whistling cheerfully proceeds on his way.

Against a virgin sky he discovers a gleaming bird,
he lives up to all expectations, nowhere does he repeat himself.

Rung-weary he subscribes to the rules of the day and everything
he grasps becomes fragile. The razor-sharp pleasure
when he smashes a valuable vase or a bottle against a wall.

What would he do if someone caught him in the very act?
Willingly let himself be led like a cow to the slaughterhouse?

III

During his first expedition he plays a game of football
with his fellow-sufferers on a particularly slippery surface.

Laughing faces when falling and getting up again,
street faces with the glaring light right in the eyes.

The dogs vigilant along the improvised sidelines.
The lucidity of glaciers. Dazzling rocks.

A spectacle for an empty hall that must distract
our attention from their gnawing hunger, their failures.

After thirty minutes there is still no score, but
their soothing subtle distinctions! Everything under control.

IV

Carefully he unclothes her. Carefully she unclothes him.
Her body is magnificent. His body is magnificent. Applause!

A night in which the moonlight brings triumphant
turmoil: the re-won glance, the salt-blurred windows.

A night in which his house, built on piles, constructed entirely
of wood, the front door locked, the rooms deserted,

stays standing only with difficulty, shakes on its foundations.

V

Advertising headlines lead him astray.

Absent-mindedly he rings the right words.

A gnawing premonition makes him vigilant and as
in the chaos directly after an explosion, he finds in succession
an arm, a pedestrian crossing, a handbag, a face.

This way we're getting nowhere: only when the smoke has cleared
is he aware of the screams, the swelling sirens.

He stares at his bleeding hands and bursts into
hysterical laughter. So easily digestible, the order of the day.

VI

He rushes through villages and towns, pursued by a jubilant crowd. A whirling choreography of wild boxing moves into thin air, a raging race along full-page ads, posters announcing his arrival.

Look, there he shoots round a corner, having escaped attention, out of breath and invisible without an audience, immersed in an alarming rhythm. Let us congratulate him.

His thousandfold grin. The bloody irritatingness.

VII

During his last expedition he really sees water on fire.

The fires seem even fiercer due to the glittering reflection.

That afternoon his fellow expedition members come one by one and stand next to him in a cloud of unpleasantness. Ice-cold earth.

VIII

He who withstood the daylight, he who at the same time could laugh
and sing, he who hid disappointments! It all began so well.

We could glue him to the wall and admire him.

His sunken cheeks, his black-rimmed eyes, his eyes that
skim past you – where have we noticed him before?

A child, lost among coats, legs, jingling, conversations
and where oh where is mummy now, dispersed, all done with.

ACCUSATIONS

Whoever is not clever would do well to retire
immediately, the same applies to the colour-blind,
to those who are waiting at a bus stop
for the bus, a miracle, a shower
or thunder storm, an honest division.

The sentences that are forthwith to open the attack
from every conceivable angle are grammatically
at the ready. The sole defence is with abandon to join in
the chattering yourself, in front of the mirror, in court.

But no argument manages to get the truth
on its side: brothers, sisters sit down
in silence. Language is no burden, no existence.

MEETING ON THE STAIRCASE

With renewed courage we are back in the broken up city where he and she feel at home. His behaviour has been different, the past hours, days, months, completely silent but different, as if he has already lost everything. It is not difficult to see: his hedging and his hesitating.

We can heighten the mood even further and thus the profundities get slowly under way. Wasn't it wonderful the way she stood there on her balcony, the way she ran downstairs to receive the post when it arrived. The way she's lying on the sofa now, a cigarette held loosely in her hand.

He nodded, she looked back. Which of them will survive the other one? Two floors up, step by step, for a moment he's taken off balance but relieved we can breathe in: not the least chance of a fatal outcome. At the last moment the rhythmic street noises offer no security, ever faster ever higher.

YOU HAVEN'T SAID A WORD YET

What has to change here? There is no middle course, the escalator works, the coffee is hot, the trains leave on the dot, the traffic jams unblocked.

What's past would fit with ease into a backpack. There is no middle course, gradually we have got used to it, no real surprises left

not on the face of it, though there is no end to our nocturnal operations.

The tourist who spots no one in the hall of the hotel, the neighbour washing his car in his dressing gown, his wife who comes humming, the bride-to-be repeating her 'I do' while in the toilet.

Fortunately these interruptions are only brief, tomorrow is another day. My accent just needs getting used to sure – you see me standing here, with bloody nose, fresh from the frontline? Everything for you my love, the proofs are for the taking. Put in a good word for me if you dare.

THE GROUNDWORK HAS BEEN DONE

The need for once to let what's wrong be known
seemed ineradicable. The assignment was to start from scratch –
a comedy gives rise to expectations.

There is no system in the reconstruction yet, no scientific progress,
the group discussion stuttered into life, but those who are taking part
can not be distinguished from flesh and blood.

In a shopping street a young girl squeezes out a pimple for her friend.
The furious gestures of a taxi driver.
With a serving tray at his fingertips a waiter floats through the crowd.
Pregnant women flaunt their bellies.

Cheerfully we keep turning up at just the right time,
a music score underneath and the world is your oyster.
And look, the family album is already being brought out.

Only the man in the neighbouring café spits out his words, in thought
his dog still faithful next to his crutch. 'So I'm hot on their tail, right.'

To kill time, preferably with a sharp object.
With no diary developments can hardly be kept track of.

THE MOMENT WILL HAVE COME ONE DAY

A man wrestles her to the ground without her defending herself.

A deal is a deal: the gardens are flowering, it is lunchtime, a day like no other, celebrated in an aria, described in a poem.

She does not turn away when he hits her, she has will-power whenever she perceives the truth, she paints in her spare time.

Sometimes she snuggles up to the body of one of her best friends and they kiss until they are warm enough to sleep the whole night without being startled by every other sound.

Her mother does not understand her. Not when awake, nor when asleep, not when she lies limp in the arms of a pugnacious man.

LIKE A RIVER, ABANDONED IN ALL HASTE

Harmless water, jet-black, without current,
without origin still, without boats or swans,
no catch in our fine-meshed square net. With a
bird's eye view, simply a twisting line from a to b with
left and right reassuring symbols, open terrain,
soon we would be asleep. But we didn't sleep,
the word 'river' hung stubbornly between us,
held us on course, we had no choice, the first
landing-stages, suddenly the centre of a town, a bike
against a tree, a hand stretched out from the quay to
someone who seemed to have woken floundering from
a nightmare somewhere deep down on the map and no
matter how you screamed, no wave brought us nearer.