

## Grand lyrical poetry

# The poetry of Tsjêbbe Hettinga

**T**HE RESOUNDING, MUSICAL PERFORMANCE of Frisian poet Tsjêbbe Hettinga has made a great impression on numerous Frisian, Dutch and international audiences. He recites his poetry by heart, not just because of his poor eyesight, but principally to create maximum space for the expression of his emotions. He is also a saxophone player and he likes to compare his recitals with solos in jazz.

In Hettinga's poems the landscape of his own region, but also that of Wales and Greece, plays an important role. The poet celebrates the sea, the sky, the seagulls, the cattle, the grass, but most of all the shore, the line where two worlds meet. His poetry is about great romantic themes, such as love, decay and death, about longing for strange shores and the longing to be back home. It is not a poetry of fine-spun reasoning but one of images.

The images Hettinga evokes seem to be prompted by the sound patterns of the Frisian language, or by previous images and this sometimes results in their baroque enumeration, over which he keeps control by a regular syllabic pattern in regular stanzas and by giving his poems an epic framework. His strongly expressive musical language tends to carry the reader away and the listener still more. Attending a recital by Hettinga is an experience in itself. In this respect T.S. Eliot's words 'Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood' certainly apply.

In 1995 Hettinga's bilingual book *Vreemde kusten / Frjemde kusten* was published, including the CD *De foardrachten* (The Declamations). It was generally hailed as a success and sold thousands of copies. Four years later an edition of this book was published in English and Frisian, entitled *Strange shores / Frjemde kusten*. In 2001 his Frisian collection *Fan oer see en fierder* was awarded the most important prize in Frisian literature: the Gijsbert Japickx Price.

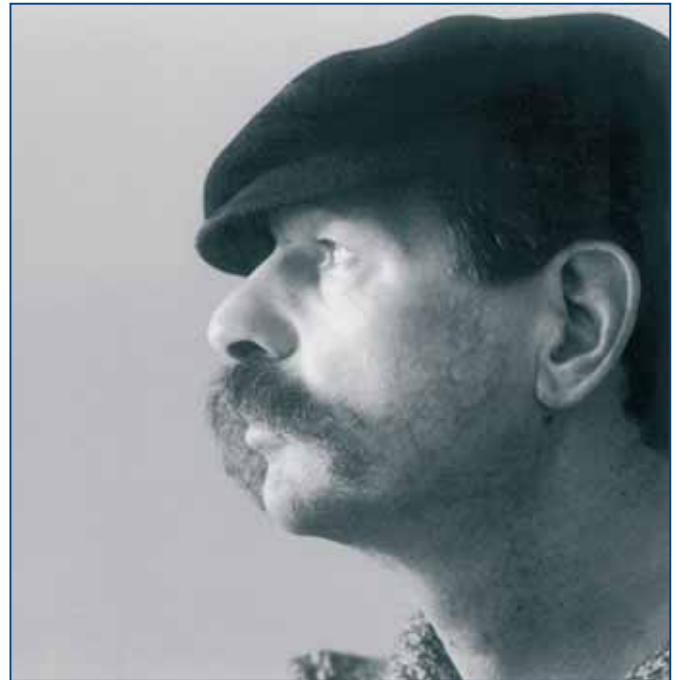


photo Jaap Schaaf

Tsjêbbe Hettinga (b. 1949) was born in Burchwert, a small village in the Province of Friesland in the Netherlands. He studied Dutch and Frisian language and literature at Groningen State University and has been living in Ljouwert / Leeuwarden, capital of Friesland, since 1982. In 1973 he published *Yn dit lân*, the first of his twelve volumes of poetry. His most recent publication is *Platina de zee* (2003), a Frisian-Dutch book of poems for which he cooperated with poet Benno Barnard.

*Hettinga is not an oracle-spelling, blind visionary whose poetry happens to make some sense on paper only occasionally. On the contrary, it is the other way round: he is a very special poet, a lyricist and a constructor rolled into one, a poet who can make the language of speech sing, a colourful painter who is very conscious of what he is doing.'*

GUUS MIDDAG in *NRC HANDELSBLAD*

*We will have to get accustomed to this broad and mythic style, as if reflection, irony and conciseness had never existed, and to the fact that poets can be visionaries again unashamedly. (...)*  
*Hettinga is an exceptional poet in our country, someone who honours the legacy of Slauerhoff and Marsman and, more distantly, reminds one of Baudelaire.*

ROB SCHOUTEN in *VRIJ NEDERLAND*



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### HETTINGA ABROAD

Hettinga performed at many important international occasions, such as the Frankfurt Book Fair, the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam, the Barcelona Book Fair and the London Festival of Literature. His poems have been translated and published in Dutch, English, German and Spanish.

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## An interview with the Frisian poet Tsjêbbe Hettinga

### ‘A soft spot for harbours’

by Corine Vloet  
(November 28, 2003, NRC Handelsblad)

*translated by George Hall*

The ‘epic’ poetry of Tsjêbbe Hettinga is characterized by a remarkable attentiveness to light and colour. ‘My sensory perceptions are very interchangeable’.

He prefers not to discuss ‘extra-literary things’. Requests from television, radio or the newspapers looking for a human-interest story, about his near-blindness, for example, are categorically rejected. But if you wish to talk about his work, the Frisian poet Tsjêbbe Hettinga turns into an extremely loquacious partner who, at his kitchen table in the Frisian capital of Leeuwarden, can passionately expand for hours on topics such as his wanderlust, a long poem about the village where he grew up, or the colour of words.

In the past ten years, it has gradually become evident to the whole of the Netherlands that Hettinga is the best Frisian-language poet of the present day, a fact that was recognized in Friesland some time ago. Hettinga (1949) made his debut in 1971, when one of his poems won a Frisian literature award. Since then, he has published numerous well-received collections of poetry in Frisian. However, it was only with a spectacular performance at the Frankfurter Buchmesse in 1993, which caught the attention of the international public, in conjunction with the bilingual collection *Vreemde kusten / Frjemde kusten* (Strange Shores) published in 1995, that his reputation was established in the rest of the country. A second bilingual collection appeared recently, *Platina de zee / Fan oer see en fierder* (From Overseas and Further). For the Frisian part of this collection he received the Gysbert-Japicx Award, the highest Frisian literary honour, in 2001.

It is no coincidence that one of Hettinga's performances was the impulse for his national (and international) breakthrough. Hettinga recites his poems by heart, like an old bard. The declamation is an integral part of his work, forming 'an extension of what is written on paper', as Hettinga explains. His last two collections also include a CD comprising all his Frisian poems. Independently of these, *The Town Always Ready*, a long epic poem about the village in which he was raised, appeared on CD in 2000. A few weeks ago, a new CD was issued, *Oan 'e brek in dei / Een dag aan de Brekken* (A Day on the Brekken), inspired by the work of the Frisian poet and painter Gerben Rypma (1878-1963). It is as yet only available in Friesland.

Anyone hearing Hettinga recite his poetry will not easily forget the occasion. He performs in a sing-song musical Frisian in which the rhythms drive the work forward so relentlessly that it is difficult to read the Dutch or English translation at the same time: the recital absorbs the listener's full attention. Nonetheless, Hettinga does not regard the oral element of his poetry as being dominant. 'I don't agree with Dylan Thomas's statement that "the written poem is half the poem",' he says. 'There's too much opposition there. To me, the paper and the recital are complementary. My poems are not epics. They do possess epic ingredients, due to the narrative elements they contain – without them becoming narrative poems.'

But the classics are also present in his poetry in other ways: the many references to Greek mythology in *Platina de zee*, the long stanzas, the grand, lyrical, often epic style, and Hettinga's great themes – transience, love, death, wanderlust, and nostalgia. 'I elaborate the things I've experienced, which are the roots of my ideas, in such a way that personal anecdotal elements are eliminated and universal human elements remain,' he explains. Hettinga writes in strikingly sensory, sensual images that often refer back to nature, to the Frisian landscape and, repeatedly, to the sea. He feels akin to poets such as Dylan Thomas, Derek Walcott and Walt Whitman, all of whom he has translated into Frisian. 'I am particularly fond of poets who sing, who are aware

of sound and tone,' he says. 'But perhaps I should mention Lucebert first of all, the way he sings is unbelievable! This may not be what Dutch readers immediately observe in his poetry – that is usually his metaphorical language – but it is an inextricable part of his poetry and it forms its colour and character.'

However, Dutch critics primarily compare Hettinga to Slauerhoff, Marsman, and even Baudelaire. Hettinga, laughing: 'I have a soft spot for harbours, big harbours, industrial ports. Whenever I get the chance to visit a harbour, I always go and meander around there.' As he stated in 'Strange Shores':

I rove for hours through this labyrinth of docks,  
Drinking in the sailor's pubs: under the cover  
Of the night and neon, rosy women are  
Sailing in the bunks of the wreck, called *The World*

'Those restless Slauerhoff traits, yes, I recognize them. I began travelling when I was very young, with my father who was in the horse trade. He took me all over the country as a child. When I was around sixteen, I hitchhiked everywhere, through Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, further and further. You can trace it all back to intense curiosity about what lies beyond the horizon.

'Years ago, in the seventies, I once met a blues singer in a pub,' Hettinga continues. 'He had heard that I wanted to go to America. He said, "Why should you go to America? You can't see a thing. So what's the use of leaving here?" At that time, I could see much better than I can nowadays, but my eyes were pretty bad. I answered, "But you don't do everything with your eyes, do you?" I've always remembered that question. My eyes have become worse over the years but my urge to travel has not disappeared. It is not an unbearable restlessness but more of a longing to move, to look around, to experience new things. Of course it's true that you meet yourself everywhere, no matter where you go. In that sense, travelling is a fantastic, childish magic lantern. It's an illusion, you are pulling the wool over your own eyes, but it is a fantastic illusion, and you yourself are the person doing the pulling. The real point of

travelling, meeting people who fire your imagination, that has never diminished. That has nothing to do with my eyes.’

Despite his restlessness, Hettinga’s work expresses a deep devotion to Friesland, and many of his poems are solidly anchored in the Frisian landscape. ‘*The Town Always Ready*’, for example, a long epic poem about Burgwerd, the village where he grew up:

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From the breathless mouth of Marilyn Monroe, a curvaceous  
Silhouette cut out of discarded tin, tacked to  
The growling front of the blue Ford Dearborn  
And hotly pursued by the hired hands, as hurried  
As the flow of cash and the bouncing seed in the fields of  
The Noordoostpolder and New Holland (oh blood-red  
Baler that swallowed summer and spat it  
Out again as fall), bounding like eager young pups,  
Until at last – down, Tarzan! – tractors and balers fell still,  
Campfire, beer and starry night above the L.A.B. bus:  
Red hotel in the middle of nowhere,  
And in the light of a nomadic moon a jeep,  
With the clumsily painted words BURGWERD – *Always Ready*

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(transl. Susan Massotty)

Hettinga: ‘I was asked by my own village to recite several poems for the Friesland Festival in 2000. It was a great honour and I was pleased to agree. It did turn out to be fantastic, with the brass band playing on the farm cart the whole day long – I once played there myself. The village had also asked me to write something especially for the occasion, and that set me thinking: what was my own relationship to the village? Prior to that, I had never evoked my youth or my memories in my work, not in such a directly personal way.’

Hettinga went looking for details he remembered, a tin Marilyn Monroe on the front of the tractor, the slogan ‘Always Ready’ – they could all be recovered. A photograph of Marilyn even turned up, which now graces the CD cover. ‘A tiny photograph, since nobody had a camera in those days. The photographer visited the village, went to the villages festivities, and copies of the photos were displayed in the greengrocer’s window, the one the right way up, the other upside down. You could order them there.’ It was the fifties and sixties and America was propagated as the promised land. ‘And it was, too’ Hettinga says. ‘The Americans were our liberators, they brought films and cigarettes. Another factor was that people I knew from our village emigrated there. *It lân fan dream en winsken* – the country of dreams and wishes – the sky was the limit!’

*The Town Always Ready* describes a youth’s development into adulthood, against the background of that village, in the first and third person alternately. ‘It is a treacherous perspective,’ the author concedes. The child somehow remains young, consistently recalling the ‘inner self’. This yearning for wonder and innocence, for a certain naivety, connected to the impossibility of turning back the years, is a constant factor in Hettinga’s work. ‘Eternity: a ragamuffin with a jampot,’ as he poetically states in *Het Wijckeler Hop*.

‘Naivety is something marvellous in a person,’ Hettinga claims with conviction. ‘I refer to the naivety of someone who is worldlywise but still retains his or her innocence. I can feel that naivety in myself, it has to do with the child in me – the child I should stay. It is easy to become hard or bitter due to circumstances. Keeping your naivety is something you should aspire to, going against the current if necessary. It’s a question of character, you have to fight for it.’

This theme touches on Hettinga’s admiration for the Frisian poet and painter Gerben Rypma, who was the subject of his lyrical poem *Een dag aan de Brekken* (A Day on the Brekken). ‘Rypma lived pretty secluded, he went his own way,’ Hettinga explains. ‘It wasn’t appreciated by everybody. His studio

hut was set on fire, some of his paintings were lost. His placing himself outside the community was not accepted. Rypma was a very highly strung man, extremely intelligent, philosophical. He followed his own path and accepted the consequences. I think that deserves respect. It required a lot more courage then than it would today. But it is still the same to a certain extent, especially in the countryside. People who go their own way don't have an easy passage.'

*Een dag aan de Brekken* is perhaps Hettinga's most picturesque poem, with stanzas such as 'Een hoeve weggekwest door groendruppelende bomen' (a farmstead painted out by green-dripping trees'). A remarkable attentiveness to light and colour characterizes his entire oeuvre. The striking synaesthetic imagery in his work is no coincidence: when one sense is activated, people with synaesthesia (roughly one in 2000) experience a sensation from one or more of the other senses. 'Colour hearing' is the most common: one 'sees' colours when one hears sounds or music, or reads numbers or words. But the combination of colour with taste, smell or movement also occurs. The perceived colours remain constant down through the years.

Hettinga endorses this: 'My own senses seem to be very closely connected. They have been this way since I was a boy, so that my sensory perceptions are easily interchangeable. I have a picture and a colour with everything I hear, smell and feel. This has nothing to do with good or bad eyesight, it's in your head.' (This has indeed been confirmed by research – when synaesthetes hear sounds, the visual centre in the brain is also activated.) In 2000, Hettinga wrote a lecture for the Poetry Afternoons in Antwerp as a reaction to the lecture by Jorge Louis Borges on his blindness. The title of Hettinga's lecture was 'A Chronic Case of Synaesthesia', and in this he presents a marvellous example: 'when the band I play in has done its sound-check before a gig, I see the proper balance between the vocals and the various instruments in terms of intense red, golden yellow, bronze, intermittent green and blue, white that wants to become silver.'

But even separate words have a specific colour to him – a fact that has clearly influenced his poetry. ‘Fierte’ (distance), for example, has a ‘thin blue colour’; he experiences the phrase ‘slim simmer’ (harsh summer) from the poem *De blauwe havik van Wales* (The Blue Hawk of Wales) as having a ‘bright silver-like colour’. This latter colour is specific for this combination – it is unusual because the standard phrase is *slim kâld*, severe cold. ‘The expression has taken on a life of its own,’ Hettinga proudly explains. ‘Nowadays I hear people in my immediate surroundings using it to describe sultry summer days.’ And in the ‘ee’ sounds that follow the phrase ‘slim simmer’, Hettinga perceives ‘a thinning and whooshing away, vanishing in light, flying off’ – comparable to the ‘ie’ (pronounced as ‘ee’) in ‘fierte’.

Physically, Hettinga can still see real-life colours to a certain degree, ‘if I’m close by and there is a good incidence of light’. In his youth he was told that there was a fifty per cent chance that he would be completely blind by the time he reached thirty, due to the degenerative eye disease from which he suffers. (Later, on the phone, he emphasizes the enormous intensification of his lust for life that this knowledge entailed.) Fortunately, he belongs to the fifty per cent that retain partial sight. ‘Light, changes in light, that is really the most I can see. Details and colour intensity have been reduced to a minimum.’ (‘Nonetheless,’ he reflects later on the phone, ‘poor sight is still a form of sight. It can even stimulate artistic imagination, produce original pictures that actually arise from inaccurate perception.’)

Outside, in town, night has fallen, while Hettinga continues his animated discourse on the incidence of light on Vlieland (one of the Dutch Wadden islands, CV) and on the Greek islands where he once lived. ‘On those islands, it is easy to recognize the influence of the sea on the land, in the light, in the flora, in the silt,’ he outlines. ‘The sea light is everywhere. In fact, *Platina de zee* actually begins with it, with the light, the sea light. And ends with it too: ‘een licht/ Dat een en al lokaas is voor zijn blinde passagier’ (a light / that is nothing but bait for his blind passenger). In Greece you have variations in the intensity

of light, it has something to do with the winds. It's blue for months on end, but the atmospheric conditions change continuously, making it brighter or less bright. The brightness of the light enormously intensifies the colours of the sea. The horizon receives its sharpness. This is something fantastic, marvellous! The more you look, the more details you see. That is something I find difficult,' he utters quietly. 'But I have seen it all'.

## General information on Frisian poetry

Modern day Frisian poets such as Tsjêbbe Hettinga write their poems in the second official language of the Netherlands, which was once spoken along the North Sea coast from the Belgian-Dutch border in the south to the German-Danish border in the north. Today, the Netherlands northern province of Friesland (Fryslân) has over 600,000 inhabitants, of whom approximately 450,000 are able to speak Frisian and 350,000 consider it their native language. Although the Frisian language community is relatively small, it raises great poets and seems to do so increasingly in modern times.

Literary tradition in the language really began with the Renaissance poet Gysbert Japiks (1603-1666), but it was not until the Romantic period of the nineteenth century that Frisian literature began to flourish. From these days onwards poetic tradition in Frisian became firmly established, forming a small but steady flow among the major streams of poetry in the western world. In the twentieth century Frisian classics like Obe Postma (1868-1963), Fedde Schurer (1898-1968) and Douwe Tamminga (1909) emerged, clearing the way for modern poets such as Jan Wybenga (1917-1994), Tiny Mulder (1921) and later on Piter Boersma (1947) and Tjsêbbe Hettinga (1949). Most recent years witnessed the rise of the youngest generation of lyrical Frisians, including Albertina Soepboer (1969) and Tsead Bruinja (1974).

More general information on Frisian authors, history and literature can be found on the website of Tresoar, the Frisian Historical and Literary Centre at [www.tresoar.nl](http://www.tresoar.nl) (although this website has an English section, some information may only appear in Frisian or Dutch).

Sample translation from

*Fan oer see en fierder* by Tsjêbbe Hettinga  
(Montaigne, 2000)

Translated by Susan Massotty\*

- De Krûk – original Frisian version of ‘The Jug’
- The Jug
- From Overseas and Farther
- Under the World
- Arrival
- Dance Your Daggers into My Skin
- Mulberry Tree

*Strange Shores / Frjemde kusten* by Tsjêbbe Hettinga  
(Frysk & Frij, 1999)

Translated by James Brockway and Tsjêbbe Hettinga

- Strange Shores

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\* Hettinga’s collection *Fan oer see en fierder* (From Overseas and Farther, 2000) consists of nine relatively large poems. His current English translator, Susan Massotty, aims to eventually translate the entire collection.

Previous bi- or multilingual editions of Hettinga’s poetry include:

*8 Gedichte / Gedichten* (with German translations by Babs Gezelle Meerburg and Ronald Noppers; *Frysk en Frij*, 1993).

*Vreemde kusten / Frjemde kusten* (with Dutch translation by Benno Barnard; includes a CD; *Atlas*, 1995).

*Fryslân! De wrâld! Friesland! Die Welt!* (an anthology of poems of Obe Postma and Tsjêbbe Hettinga, with German translations by Ard Posthuma, Babs Gezelle Meerburg and Ronald Noppers; *Attempto Verlag*, 1998).

*Strange shores / Frjemde kusten* (with English translations by James Brockway; includes a CD; *Frysk en Frij*, 1999).

*It doarp Always Ready / Het dorp Always Ready / The Town Always Ready* (poem on a CD with Dutch translation by Benno Barnard and Tsjêbbe Hettinga, and English translation by Susan Massotty; *MONTAiGNE*, 2000).

*Platina de zee* (Frisian-Dutch publication by Tsjêbbe Hettinga and Benno Barnard; includes a CD; *Atlas*, 2003).

## De Krûk

Hy dronk, wylst syn eagen de strakblauwe eagen fan  
De fiskersfrou yn it swart troffen en betizen, by  
De boarne, yn it soel middeisskaad fan ferlegen  
Seders, rook fan fisk en hars, sicht oer see en sloepen, leech.  
Stil stie sy, wylst har fersonken eagen syn drinken  
Seagen yn 'e nacht fan smoarde lûden, leafdes toarst en  
De goederjouske krûk op har no skrokken skouder,  
Neist in ezel, blau en stil; troch it blank ear fan har earm  
De see, om har heupen de branning, tusken beiden,  
Ferstomme troch it stoarmjen fan in eagenblik stilte:

Sy hienen dronken, en sjoen hoe't de fiskers yn har  
Lytse sloepen stadich lytser waarden, de fan ûnthjit  
Drippende netten fan 'e stjerren strakker, foller,  
Twa heale moannen de griene haven yn dreauwen, mei  
It sâlt fan 'e see fyn yn 'e wyn oer it brutsen  
Iis yn 'e glêzen op in terras mei swarte slangen,  
Wite amers; en it paad nei har hutte (néi har  
Heuvel-op, de gloppen troch, fanwegen fiskersmessen)  
Hie se útlein, fielend dat er komme soe, en hy  
Wie har heuvel beklommen, hie him lave oan har krûk.

## The Jug

He drank, his eyes catching the confused blue eyes of the  
Black-clad fisherman's widow beside the spring, standing in  
The sultry shade of a bashful cedar, the sharp reek  
Of resin and fish, a glimpse of sea and boats, now empty.

She stood still, her sunken eyes seeing him drinking in  
A night of smothered cries and thirsty love, while she balanced  
The water jug on her shocked shoulder – beside her  
A donkey, blue and still; through the pale white ear of her arm  
The sea; beyond her hips the surf, and in between them,  
Struck dumb by the stormy winds of a moment of silence:

They had drunk, and seen the fishermen in their boats grow  
Slowly smaller, while the net of stars, dripping with promise,  
Had grown fuller and more taut, two half moons had floated  
Into a green harbor, and the wind had sprinkled salt on  
The broken ice in the glasses on a terrace with  
Black hoses and white buckets; and he had followed the path  
To her hut (much later than she, up the hill, through the  
Dark alleys, away from fisherman's knives), just as she had  
Described it to him, sensing that he would come, and he  
Had climbed her hill, had slaked his thirst on her obliging jug.

## From Overseas and Farther

A letter, a flight, a getting together again  
Under the corrugated roof of our cottage, hidden  
In the cool noon of an olive grove on an island  
Amid the waves of an Aegean archipelago:  
Eleven days of you, warm and ripe as the fruit you  
Brought with you; and while your eyes dispel a man's darkest light,  
The trace of urban haste around your mouth comes to rest  
Like the hot chalky dust of the path that led you here, which  
Keeps bumping into itself as the blue tractor from  
The village by the sea winds its way back down to the shore.

After a red drink on the shady green altar of  
An olive tree, the full sun beating down on an empty  
Well, looking and being looked at by a woman and  
A donkey, a bevy of turkeys babbling in broken  
Japanese beside a two fifty cc Suzuki,  
Discussing the island's two faces or laughing at how  
The two women and a man manage on an ancient  
Motorbike, we whiz down the winding road to the quiet  
Bay with its shoulder-high waves, the wind more of a sigh  
From a far-off storm, forever yesterday's storm, the sea.

And your dark gleaming face, wave after wave exposing  
The white coral of your teeth to the coast, which silently  
Stares back from beneath its green hunter's cap; there you stand,  
Up to your ankles in the sea, where the shoreline sucks in  
Its girth, a souvenir caught between two time-frozen  
Waves in a beautifully scalloped bowl of blue oval glass,  
With your tight white swimsuit rolled down to the darker O  
Of your hips, your breasts unbelievably bare and your arms  
Already surrendering themselves to the water's  
Latest onslaught, you, a Caribbean Aphrodite.

Accosted as well as lured by the names of the ships  
In the summer harbor that Hercules Seghers captured  
With a few strokes of his pen all those eternally  
Sailed away centuries ago – *Zakynthos, Calini,*  
*Castor/Pollux, Stardust, Aspropirgos* – you stand there  
In the September sun, the wind caressing your long white  
Summer dress, hoping to carry you off, your flaunted  
Figure a trophy in high heels, with your hands on your hips,  
Poised atop a sea wall built to survive the harshest  
Of winter storms, defying the fishermen and their nets.

Early in the evening, when twilight drifts like a shepherd  
And his flock through ancient groves of supplication, when our  
Simple cottage, with its corrugated roof, becomes  
Even hotter than the stones of the well beside the dead  
And silent chairs, when the bandits of the libido  
Begin to implore the prison of the night, you pick up  
A black hose and, naked to the waist, engage us and  
The water (Black glass that makes your body even blacker)  
In a water fight, so that while the icy spurts rinse  
The sea salt from our shocked skins, we shriek in childish delight.

And then stoop-shouldered darkness, smelling of wood and sea,  
Seals off the olive groves (assisted by the dogs growling  
At their chains), unleashes the rats and fetches the moon  
From the hold of a sunken ship, all the while listening  
At the edge of a murmuring well to the muffled  
Chitchat of the two women as they help each other dress  
And the revealing bursts of smothered giggles that keep  
Coming from our cottage, so that the thought of wood and sea  
Adds an unexpected fragrance to the freshly coifed  
Hair and exotic flowers that color this mute darkness.

Under the arbor, home to salamanders and ripe  
Clusters of grapes that conjure up the Song of Songs before  
Our weary eyes, in the ghostly shine of candlelight  
That dances along an old wall scrawled with the Homeric  
Handwriting of Kyrios Seismos, you stroll up and  
Down in a white dancing gown donned for the occasion,  
Yet your lips betray your longing for your own island,  
Your Caribbean roots, and while your hands excitedly  
Tell the story, your eyes burn like the nightly fire that  
Lured long-ago ships from a wondrously strange continent.

Later on, you sail, buoyed by the swollen excitement  
Of a dimly lit party for the local stags and bucks,  
Butchers of goats and sheep, farmers from the villages  
And nearby wanton hills, while dancing in the Spanish arms  
Of a stranded sea captain (once in the clutches of  
A Chilean viper's nest and now, with a peacock's pride,  
Astonishing the poor villagers with two adders  
On a string); into the night you sail, light as a feather,  
Over oceans – oh bright stars – to suffer love's shipwreck,  
Like a letter in a bottle washed up on Curaçao:

*Oh Mother, it's as still as the grave, all around me  
Water made of glass and mute fish with mouths, o, wide open  
Beneath the sleeping coast of Koraalspecht, as still as  
The crickets and the night they impregnated with their chirps  
Before it gave birth to a low-slung dawn here in Fort  
Nassau, enveloping me in early light, while the high  
Wind seeks shelter with you in Santa Rosa, as still  
As the sheaf of letters in your lap; and in the garden  
A mango dances a transparent golden tango  
With the trade wind, a proud northeasterly from overseas*

*And farther. All alone, like the bashful iguana  
Sunning itself in the sharp heat of the afternoon  
On a tall cactus (daily dreaming the rapid day  
In two), alone with my heart among the sintebibu.*

*But I sing and swing through the night, the voice and belly  
Of a seaport, breathe in the air of fish and sea, mournful  
Blues and the legend of a white hand, a sailor's hand  
On my expectant black shoulder, leaning into the wind  
But as strong as the watapana, from the throbbing wait  
Of a maidenly existence beneath a tamarind.*

*And so the pounding of the waves on the two islands  
(Will the cork keep the spirit in the bottle?) courses through  
My veins, slyly robs me of my thoughts and takes me back  
To the sea, though I no longer know the source of the shrieks –  
The children on the beach, the sea birds above the fish  
Or the dolphins in the bay – until in the sand of  
My dreams my eleven little darlings dance and sing:  
“Ken’ ken’ nos ke tuma ke tuma ke tuma, ken’, ken’...”  
In a circle in the twilight beneath a tall tree  
By a well in a cloud above a ship in a bottle.*

## Under the World

In his dusty olive grove, overlooking his son's grave in  
The shadowy depths below, stood an early fisherman,  
Drying the dead-weighted nets of an aimlessly drifting night.  
From deep in the valley hoarse roosters crowed the light higher  
And higher, while nearer to the path leading down to the sea  
Cicadas slit the net of silence surrounding the house,  
Passed down from father to son, where his wife lay fast asleep and  
Dreamed of her husband, the time-blind fisherman, who picked up  
A hammer (the same one, he knew, his son had once used to fix  
The derelict dovecote) and continued building his boat.  
She spurred him on from the depths of her rudderless desires,  
Tugging and jerking at the sunken anchor of her sleep.  
With death at his back the feverish fisherman worked himself  
Into a sweat, oh pounding heart, and banished all thought of  
Two white legs imprisoned in a pair of black fishnet stockings.  
Nail after nail was driven into stem, stern, time and tears,  
Until they mingled and were washed into the sea of his son  
In the depths below, a rising sea, in which his island  
Sailed like a green barnacle-clad ship, with hundreds of shrieking  
Seagulls in its wake, through storm-tossed centuries and broken  
Mountains, in water stretching from heaven to earth in the clouds.  
And as she watched his face she could see the earth's womb open  
Up with a convulsive shudder, which happened every time his  
Eyes sailed deep into her soul and he rammed her delicate

Hull, just as he was doing now; and he turned to her, lay down  
His hammer, whispered a soft farewell to the dovecote and  
Went back to his work, staring at the teeth of his glinting saw,  
And since its sharp edge produced a smile in him, she also  
Saw his teeth and then in the steely blue of his eyes the sea,  
So that all her longing was laid bare in its reflection.  
And the shadow of the sculpted olive trees ran through her dream  
Like green oil slithering voluptuously down the curves  
Of the trunks, only to run out again on the other side  
With the long-legged leap of a sea cat or sea serpent.  
Then the powerful strokes of the singing saw slipped inside her  
Panting breath, climbing up on the ochre coast of her flesh,  
While the steamy sweat of the fisherman streamed into his boat,  
Into the sea and down her face, turning it to silver.  
Obedient to the hammer blows filling the blood-stained boat,  
To the oar-hard muscles struggling against a heaving chest:  
The heart. Surrendered to the inexorable will of time,  
Which will awaken in either the fullness of mercy  
Or the confining emptiness of vengeance, clutching onto  
That which knows no mercy: the body. Just then – as the cruel  
Nails, curved like horns, frantically clawed their way to drier heights,  
To the refuge of the mountain goat, the mythical ark  
In the eternal snow, up towards the piercing stab of the sun  
And the hell-lit heavens – magma erupted from the earth.

The sea trembled, swelling the waves, and the yellow bowsprits, booms,  
Gaffs and masts thrashed against each other, growing entangled  
In the black network of cables and halyards, ropes and stays, lines  
Swinging back and forth in the lurid light of an orange sky.  
A school of silver saber-shaped fish fled from the curving spine  
Of the inky blue sea, their headless bodies hurriedly  
Darting, two by two, through the water in a shiver of fright.  
And while soot and ashes drifted down from twilight-tinged clouds,  
The arching sea savagely leapt at the foot of the mountains  
And rolling hills, where the dead lay quaking in their coffins.  
The frothing mouths of the waves recoiled for just one moment from  
The cross with the color photograph of a skinny boy  
In a light-red sport shirt lifting a barbell over his head  
In the shadowy depths below, before the hills listed  
And sank. Then, from the sinking tops of the olive trees there came  
The white skeletal frame of a fishing boat, with an oar  
Shaped like a hammer, a billowing pair of blue overalls,  
Without their fisherman, and a woman of salt staring  
Dazedly in the dense light to where an island used to be.  
High in the sky – the head of a dead polar bear – the moon.

## Arrival

A flock of hail-white snow geese winged its way north, so  
He sailed south, before his sparkling harbor could  
Silt up into a landscape of seaweed and salt,  
Leaving behind the bronze-green farmyard and brass  
Andirons, only to be blown for days on end  
On high blue winds, like dust when the fallow fields  
Of fall are sown in spring, and on he sailed until  
The sea, taking pity on a soul that chafed  
At the anchor, bore him aloft and the sunburned  
Ears of the sail harkened to Biscay's brazen  
Swell, the snarling bark of Atlas and Gibraltar,  
The creak of dovetail joints and grumbling rudder,  
Until at last black mountains burst through the twilight  
And the seemingly endless eternity.

Passion rippled through the timbers of keel and hull,  
On an undercurrent of passing dolphins.

A white dove, driven by hunger and thirst to land  
On the deck early one morning, suddenly  
Fled the safety of the copper porthole and flew  
Up toward the North Star, where an unknown island,  
On the cusp of dusk, arose from the depths, just as  
Calypso's island had once loomed up before  
The shipwrecked son of Erisos, after he'd clung  
For nine days and nights to a broken beam and  
Twice been buffeted by the wind's four directions.  
Time, noting the existence of distance, called  
All hands on deck, raked its lights over twinkling towns  
And abandoned crossroads, seeking stars and fish,  
Still hoping, like the gray-browed beach, to see the fleet  
That had once set sail in search of a woman.

In that fruitless search his soul recognized itself  
As a lone island in a sea of islands.

On the dark altar of the beach, where he landed  
With a thump of joy and the smack of wet wood,  
In a cathedral of rugged cliffs, sea urchins  
And crashing horses with starfish on their necks,  
His arrival was branded into the sand by  
A fire, one and a half mules, still as statues,  
And a welcoming man in a long black cloak, who  
Greeted him with the same majestic calm and  
Patient understanding with which he rotated  
The lamb on the spit and repeatedly knelt  
To blow life back into the soul in the fire. And  
With the same air as the mules, nibbling gently  
At the rocks, the man handed him his meal, then broke  
The silence and said: *Kalispera, file.*

## Dance Your Daggers into My Skin

Evening, creeping up unseen,  
Has mounted the wooden horse of the night—and your skin,  
Having gone from west to east, cinches the harness  
Of my lust as taut as an arrow . . . or a rainbow.  
You dance, lit by golden moonbeams and silver bats,  
In bold defiance

Of summer's sweltering heat,  
Like the wine-bottle green of the night as it neighs at  
The towering walls of love's ancient citadel,  
And at the stab and thrust of knives, mouths and fiery tongues.  
Fawning flatterers, gray with the smoke of time and  
Black from the burning

In their scorched and aching hearts,  
Rob you of your truths, uproot them from a soil fed by  
Centuries of light, snatch them from the nakedness  
Of your teeth, from the wind as it whips through your wild hair:  
Tendrils caught in the bowing and scraping brambles  
Of their lechery.

Crowing like cocks, their red combs  
Aflame, they pick their way through the illusion of light  
In the sweat-beaded barnyard of the night, which waits  
With hard green eyes for the chance to pounce like a cat at  
The dancing foot of this evening's exceedingly  
Mouse-quiet mountain.

Various suitors vie for  
Your sweet favors: the son of Mammon, who came back with  
One eye and a bag of silver, which he hopes will  
Buy your affection; an ex-sailor, who with one last  
Wave of his mustache washes up on the star-gazed  
Beach of your warm breasts;

A poor shepherd, reeking of  
Resin and retsina, who came down from his barren  
Hills on a flood of sorrow—his fate—which he longed  
To lay at your Trojan gate, since his eyes, once as light  
As those of an ibex, now glow with the olive  
Darkness of a ram;

And, despite the many eyes  
Boring into his back, a fisherman and former  
Sirtaki champion, clutching his drink and his  
Dancing partner so tightly that his hands turn into  
A bridge of longing across the brown riverbed  
Of your graceful spine.

Don't leave me, Helen, please don't  
Leave me. On you dance by yourself, fringes flying as  
You twirl across the tabletop—the battered gate  
Of this bittersweet acropolis, while night squeezes  
The lust out of the mountain like an octopus.  
Under the spell of

Bacchus and his wanton moon,  
With your owl-like talons outstretched to capture easy  
Prey and the Milky Way in the red beak of death—  
That vortex of pitch-black danger—you dance, yes, you dance  
The daggers into my skin, then turn your head and  
Dance them in again.

Suddenly the music stops,  
As if only wanting to play again at the graves  
Of the stabbers and the stabbed. He who is summoned  
Answers, he who is frenzied kills, he who waits is dead.  
Somewhere, lit by an oil lamp, you savor the taste  
Of blood in your mouth.

Reeling from a stabbing pain,  
Which makes the four red chambers of my dying ego  
Shrivel like snails, my five senses bend over your  
Startled body – and I fall, head over heels in love,  
Plunging like a bridge into the river of your  
Captivating charm.

## Mulberry Tree

Like a lure, the face of the fisherman's widow draws him  
Back to the bay and the blue swatch of land, now awash with  
A melancholy morning light, shrieking gulls, a goodbye.

On the doorstep of her cottage, amid the grapes, blown by  
The same hot winds of temptation that had sent him groping  
For food and drink and blind love after her warm welcome here,

She clings to his fingers, desperately hoping to delay  
His departure—a final lingering of soft tingling flesh  
Before a voyage into the unknown of an endless sea.

In the yellowish glow of light that dances around her  
Head, his eyes swim like two salty fish in a pool of their  
Own making, his hands reluctantly leave hers and his eyes

Glide to the hiding place in the mulberry tree, where he  
Dozed during the afternoons and where The Lady of Jazz  
(Who was smaller than Good Old Satchmo, sitting beside her

With his cap and cornet), rode a bus through what used to be  
A sea of calm grass; and in his dream there were black horses,  
Swaying wagonloads of hay and swallows perched like notes on

The music staff of the telegraph, twittering a slow  
Blues in B. Beneath the mulberry tree, a lonely mule  
Stands by a ladder leading to a plank and filtered light.

A seven-year-old boy (weightless but with bare knobby knees)  
Sits in a pickup filled with diesel fumes and all kinds of  
Impossibilities as it winds its way past the bay.

Impossible because he can't see the ripple of wind  
In the little boy's hand, and because his soul, and not he,  
Has mounted the straight-backed mule beneath the mulberry tree.

Age-old ships with slender hips and reddened cheeks row out, their  
Masts bare, braving an eastern gale in panting pursuit of  
The fleece in the golden river. Hearts pounding, the oarsmen

Ply the rocky shore of an isle shaped like a tortoise, while  
Shepherd-less goats graze the scraggly tufts from the rounded back.  
Between the shell and giant head—a trough through which the sea

Spews its mighty froth—nine donkeys, ridden by nine women  
(What a wonderful sight!), plod at their usual leisurely  
Pace through the frothing remains of a satiated sea.

Exotic herons—each one an eighteen-oared ship—fly with  
Quiet concentration in an orderly formation  
On a cloudless current of air toward a new Colchis, while

Water drips in a steady stream from the tips of their wings.  
As they soar above a bay of deep tranquility and  
Glide across the clear sand-colored light of its glassy depths,

Do they see the tortoises as giant eyes, returning  
From the coasts of Libya and Egypt to mate, or are they  
Driven by the same instinct that leads the thirsty to drink?

A sharp curve in the road and the six-cylinder roar of  
An engine climbing a hill jolt him back to the present,  
So that he once again sees the bobbing boats in the bay;

Resinous whiffs of weeping pines seeping through the window  
Make him realize that the line between indigenous and  
Transposed is so blurred that the two have gradually merged.

And yet it's the boy, light as a feather, who brings him back  
To the bare scrawny knees of his current self, whizzing through  
The big-bellied wine vat of a town and waving goodbye

To carpenter Costas—Agamemnon in a T-shirt—  
Standing outside his workshop amid a knee-high heap of  
Yellow curls, holding sway with the scepter of a yardstick,

To Tessia at the gas pump, her trademark cigarette  
Dangling from her lips, using one hand and one eye to fill  
The tank of Georgios the Bulldozer, a night owl,

To Dionysius at The Algerian Pirate  
(wondering whose bare feet were trampling the grapes of his thoughts),  
The same man who recited Cavafy's *Thermopylae*

To the distant hooting of an owl while they feasted on  
Roasted goat. Then, as the battlefield of the night began,  
The white marble angel on the silent plinth in the town's

Empty square cried: *I tan i epitas*. But here he is,  
Here where the stars in the waving fields of wheat once traveled  
To the sea and the sharp-edged shadows of the full moon fled

Like black cloaks of love from the silvery shears of morning—  
Now *this* morning—when it finally reaches the end of  
The town: a line through the name, stony lips sealed forever.

And in the deafness of a great distance, at the end of  
The diesel's descent to the sea, a flock of circling gulls,  
Seeking people and fish, swoops in and out of the harbor,

Which calls to him like bleating sheep in the hold of a ship.  
But first the mule beneath the mulberry tree takes a step  
Toward the light that lures its blind passenger back to the bay.

## Strange Shores

On black as tar steel cables all the derricks  
Have hoisted up the night above sea and harbour.  
The cries of the seagulls now a-slumber on  
The water, have been replaced by the shrill shrieks of  
Girls, who dart out to tig lads in the harbour  
Laden with sea-salt and foreign tongues, the mild wind,  
As dutifully as a bum-boat, sails down  
Through the waterways of the port, along the quays,  
Where the Houdinis of the merchant shipping  
Are quick to toss off the chains of the long, long swell,  
And, winding through dark lanes towards dead-end hearts,  
Go off on the spree with the odours of leather,  
Lavender, garlic, gasoline, tobacco.  
The busy wharfs and the tired tail-end of summer,  
The derricks and the bints fail to find each other:  
There's a sailor, landlubber still, searching here. I.

I rove for hours through this labyrinth of docks,  
Drinking in the sailor's pubs: under the cover  
Of the night and neon, rosy women are  
Sailing in the bunks of the wreck, called *The World*  
(With pimps on the leaking pumps that scoop away  
The tears.) The hollowed-out boat of the moon sails out  
So coolly between the southern continents,  
Which have marked with crosses on the blue marine charts  
Of my memory treasures with the sleeping  
Names of harbours, with the throats of screeching sea-birds,  
The grey-green eyes of a passed away mother.  
Yes, I know. All ports are like other ports. And so  
Are the silver-stealing women. *Come, my dear,*  
One of them calls. They all say that, everywhere.  
No, home is where I'd rather be, even for  
Just one night and I search and wait for a taxi.