

## Capturing casually perceived movements

# The poetry of Erik Lindner

**I**F THERE WOULD SEEM TO BE any exterior influences in Erik Lindner's work, these could best be described as 'accidental passers-by' – writers and philosophers who happened to cross the poet's path. In *Tramontane* one such passer-by is Walter Benjamin, whose motto 'Man's gaze is his edge', seems to offer a key to Lindner's poetry.

In his poems, the edge of man's gaze is the town, a room, or a landscape. Lindner tries to capture the casually perceived movements in language. His poetry is pervaded by the idea that the word creates a coherence. The idea is found again in *Tong en trede* (*Tongue and step*, 2000), a collection which, as poet Jan Baeke put it, evokes a reality 'which in its seeming triviality brings to light all sorts of wonderful, intangible facets'. This seeming triviality is primarily to be found in Lindner's images, although 'observations' might be a better word: he is a permanent wanderer, a passer-by, who carefully registers the tiny movements of life in a city or the apparent stillness in a room. 'So a passer-by explains what passing is: / a town you leave while you are staying there,' he writes in the opening poem of the cycle 'Temporary stop'. In Lindner's poetry each sentence seems to contain a new registration, and the 'rapid' succession of the observations suggests something like the continuous movement in reality, the chaos, or, in other words, the simultaneity of all those movements. But Lindner's poetry does more than record reality with almost cinematic precision. It also shows what the role of language is here: words order the incoherence of the commonplace, while simultaneously creating a 'membrane' between the poet and the perceived. Or, as a critic aptly put it: 'Lindner's poetry tries to be an image of motion that cannot be captured in language'.

It altogether needn't be a surprise that cinema and Lindner's poetry make a good match. At the Amsterdam Filmmuseum Biënnale 2003 he recited a new poem called 'Ostende' and parts of 'De sleutel' (The key) while silent films like *Images d'Ostende* (1929, by Henri Storck) were being played. Both poems appear in his most recent collection, *Tafel* (*Table*, 2004), in which cinematic perception seems to have gained importance still. Many familiar places, figures and preoccupations from previous collections return in this new one, but Lindner very carefully avoids any repetition: his focus is on refining and subtly re-defining his registrations and definitions, thus steadily composing an expanding but impressively coherent oeuvre.



photo Roeland Fossen

Erik Lindner (b. 1968, The Hague) is the author of several collections of poetry, including his first book, *Tramontane* (1996), *Tong en trede* (*Tongue and Step*; 2000), and *Tafel* (*Table*; 2004).

*'Lindner's images can nestle in your mind like a melody. There is always a window nearby, there is always water. Cars drive past regularly. There are moments that everything around you becomes Lindner-like.'*

BAS BELLEMAN in *AWATER*

*'The pivot on which these observations rest is his masterful use of the image, which abound in his shifting lines, as they casually appear and are taken note of by the poem's gaze. Coupled with his supple handling of language, this lyric approach makes for a haunting, memorable poetry.'*

DAVID O'MEARA (Canadian poet and critic)



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### LINDNER ABROAD

Lindner performed at many international literature festivals, such as the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry in England, the Taipei International Poetry Festival in Taiwan and the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam. He spend several months as a writer in residence in Marseille, France in 2004, and in Montreal, Canada in 2005. His poems have been translated into Chinese, German, English, French, Macedonian and Spanish.

A review of Erik Lindner's *Tafel*

## 'As if everything has been filmed'

by Paul Demets

(A slightly different version in Dutch was published in the Belgian newspaper *De Morgen*, 2005)

*Translated by George Hall; poems translated by Paul Vincent*

Erik Lindner creates poems like a cameraman, says Paul Demets in this review of Lindner's collection *Tafel*. 'A slow camera movement is performed in many poems and things are framed just out of focus.'

We believe that we can look. That is why we are often pleased to have a camera with us, in an attempt to place people and things in a context. When we later examine the photographs we have taken, we see the misrepresentation: the light, the surroundings, the people turn out to be different to what we imagined at the moment we pressed the button. Then we realize that we have not looked properly. It is not the photographs that have gone wrong, regardless of how we have used the camera; we ourselves have failed in our objective. We have failed because we thought we could capture reality, convinced that we had control of and insight into the situation. Photographs isolate things, and that is why they reveal peculiarities that we otherwise might not have observed.

There is a difference between looking and seeing, but how could we describe this? Perhaps seeing is a kind of deviation in looking, a gaze that loses itself – observing without a purpose, having eliminated all pre-judgement. Another, as-yet unseen reality reveals itself at such moments.

If you view things in this way, you can say that Erik Lindner is a 'seer' in his poetry. In his debut collection *Tramontane* (1996), he used a quote by Walter Benjamin as his motto: 'The gaze is the edge of the person'. Lindner is primarily concerned with the gaze that moves quickly, generating associations, but also with what Benjamin calls *Darstellung*: 'Knowledge is a possession', he wrote. To him, Truth is a form of being. We cannot know this truth, but we can demonstrate

it by means of ideas that are linguistic constructions. To Benjamin, *Darstellung* is not mere representation, and, in much the same way, Lindner does not simply present items or concepts in his poems. The poem always grows to completion in the reader's head – is there an alternative? – but Lindner puts that process to the test in an exciting manner by slowing down the observation and by introducing shifts in the arsenal of images that he presents to the reader. In that sense, it is possible to interpret the opening poem in the *Tafel* (Table) collection in a poetical fashion:

The window opens a crack  
and the table to here  
breaks  
at once

and the table's not by the window  
but has moved next to me here  
at the foot of the table  
the cloth falls off the table

in the light of the window  
the leaf bends an arm's length  
a bar breaks at the elbow  
in the drawer: crumbs paperclips

the cardboard wedge that keeps the table  
straight and the window open

a shifting square over the table  
touches the ground in one piece.

Everything in this poem begins to shift due to the change of perspective. The poet does not set things in motion, they seem to move of their own accord. Perhaps literally due to a gust of wind that blows a window open, and figuratively due to the incidence of a different light. Lindner creates this kind of passage like a cameraman. He is consistently aware of the impossibility of translating animated images via words. A slow camera movement is performed in many poems and things are framed just out of focus, as the painting on the cover by Bert de Beul, a

rather underrated contemporary of Luc Tuymans, suggests. This lack of focus invites the gaze to linger a little longer. It is no coincidence that the cycles bear titles such as 'Een lifter naar Acedia' (Hitchhiker to Acedia), 'Naar Acedia' (To Acedia), and 'Terug uit Acedia' (Back from Acedia), a reference to the Latin *acedia*, laziness. A sensual summer lethargy hangs over the poems, in which many looks are exchanged: 'Ze is daar waar zij hem heeft gezien. (Zijdelings een oogopslag/ in de tegengestelde rijrichting.)' (She is where she saw him (Obliquely a glance/ against the flow of traffic)). There is an alternation of zooming in and out, here and in many other poems in the collection. Body parts such as hands and arms are given close attention. It seems as if everything has been filmed. The line 'This afternoon's recordings will be successful' emphasizes the artificiality, the impossibility of getting things to be real. And in the poem 'De tramontane' – Lindner delights in referring to previous titles of collections, cycles or poems – we read:

Off the coast the diver rests in his story  
and sparsely draws the cliff behind the beach.  
The wind cuts the story and wears and rubs  
the leaves from off the plane trees – the window frame.

I had the wind behind me for this story.  
The journey narrated a man walked over the mountain  
and the tale gets bogged down in the sea. (...)

Like a filmmaker, Lindner assigns a determining role to light – or perhaps I should say 'illumination'? A bridge that lifts the lanterns but 'not the range of their beam', 'patches of light in the frosted glass pan / how long to stand still before a door'. Light could ensure the right framework but this is always breached in some way or other. Reality is perpetually in motion, just like the observer. In that context, the *Tafel* collection conforms closely to Lindner's previous collection, *Tong en trede* (Tongue and step). 'So a passer-by explains what passing is: / a town you leave while you are staying there', was one of the lines in that collection. Lindner offers us moving pictures that cannot actually be

understood in poetry. And, additionally, there is the continuous misleading, which he explicitly presents in one of the last poems in *Tafel*: 'Small errors, simple optical illusion / in the corner of your eye is what you see again'. The poem *Pastille de menthe* gives the impression that Lindner goes far in his doubts about the capacities of language. The first line is as follows: 'It is the word that lies, not me, you know'. In any case, language is something that exists outside him: 'The silent woman at the table / divides what is ours and what belongs to language'.

**Sample translation**

*Poems* by Erik Lindner  
(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij)

**Translated by Paul Vincent**

From *Tramontane* (Perdu, Amsterdam 1996)

Reason

18 September 1994

From *Tong en trede* (De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2000)

Ourcq

Temporary Stop

ID's (fragment)

When I Can Escape My Words No Longer

From *Tafel* (De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2004)

The Tramontana

The Window Opens a Crack

There is Blood in Your Lips

To Acedia

Naar Acedia (original Dutch version of 'To Acedia')

## REASON

Do not doubt that reason,  
that reason, that reason, that reason.  
A fly walks from the edge  
to the centre of the table top  
and back again, follows a few centimetres  
of the side, enters the emptiness  
of the pale white again, tries again  
what I don't know and then takes off.

18 SEPTEMBER 1994

All that is born can disappear.

How on a boiling day a low bench  
receives shade from seven olive trees.  
How one's bottom goes clammy in contact  
with massive and age-old stone.

How the tramontana breaks the sea's plane  
and through penetrating light of a lazy sun  
picks up and twirls the water's surface  
in hurricanes yellow, blue, ochre, sand, water.

Vertigo can dissolve, directionless.

Swallows that dive like bats do  
along the steep cliff behind the bench  
where the path winds its way through three bays  
but still points only to France.

Nothing dies willingly in Port Bou.

The girl from Aragon on the beach  
takes her skirt off and lopes like an antelope  
through the surf while her leather bag  
holds a writing case with ironwork,  
She's here only for this Sunday  
that is like a nameless history.

An empty pedestal on a steel plateau.  
Front garden of desolate customs post.  
A rock that almost slides into the sea.  
Give it designations colourblind  
play of tramontana, wind as strong  
as lofty mountains, makes you shiver in the sun.

All that is born can disappear.

The free provision of penicillin  
and morphine. In the old pension room  
two beds stand between a wall  
of disease. You and I, who is the male one?

What is being a male? The scraping  
of a blade across an inflamed throat,  
how it feels to be shaved  
one last time, for a party  
you won't attend. Or how  
a child laughing throws sand  
at the sun. Falling and no  
shame till you rise again.

All that is not born can also disappear.

Sand, roots, helm grass, tracks that never  
ran here. The inhabitants who gaze after  
the traveller but do not give his description.  
Their gait still disturbed after the building

of a monument. Now, as the tramontana  
licks at your body and picks up you and your glasses,  
carries them along. Where the passage brings  
the churchyard to the edge of the abyss above the surf.

Details of it only the short-sighted can find.  
How it got here? Fifty years ago. To for-  
get such a thing is barbaric. Even the defacing  
of an artwork is a cultural expression.

I did this. Unscrupulous. Today. Date.

## OURCQ

From the ice-breaker clearing the quay  
cracks dart though the layer of ice,  
from one bank across to the other  
the ship trembles the ice breaks up,  
the surface tilts deep into the canal  
and bulges and splits, crumbles and melts.

Now one can see  
how heavy a swan must be.  
Tough as its belly and webbed feet  
Is the ice, not white but transparent.  
Where it stands is a layer of water.

Someone scoops the ice from the fountain.  
Someone stacks tiles in a crate.  
Someone raises the bridge.

The ice-breaker approaches.  
The swan stares without pause.

## TEMPORARY STOP

Is this a town? Houses and tram  
touch the street quite separately.

This an awning. A marble column.  
A hair salon smelling of juice.

Here is a swimming pool. A glass front.  
A shopping street where traffic doesn't fit.

She doesn't bend, wading through the paddling pool  
and touching the crown of the child with her fingers.

At each movement on the photocopier  
the supermarket door slides open.

So a passer-by explains what passing is:  
a town you leave while you are staying there.

No one is silent for long in Ernie's Bar.

The owner's girlfriend dances  
in the middle of the joint, reflects  
rainbow-like in the clasp that lights up  
and narrows her waist. All revolves around her.

The silver above the bar on the mirror  
the projection through the smoke flower arrangements  
in the window the slide screen half open  
on loops low curtains, neighbours

going timidly past.

Look at the blood in that tray of lamb's liver.  
The olive oil in tins. The ispanak in a crate.

The TV screen that's bobbing in the canal.

Two people having a talk –  
their foreheads resting against each other.

On the man by the slivered ice between  
moustache and beard a paper sticks  
while he digs into the tobacco.

Watch how the blood washes  
off the flesh.

It isn't true  
you're just standing  
still by a window  
the place near-perfect  
as if the image came  
because you came past.

You must be cold  
to show something  
in words you explain  
the glass to the street  
the man and his paper  
temperament.

## ID's

What matters is just that it's somehow right  
the chance to be a component, to belong  
to a company, a collection. People  
who get changed between the low hedges  
and the barbed wire at the dune's edge.

Playing cards fall on a towel in the sand,  
provisions under cloths in a wicker basket,  
a dug-in bottle from the distillery  
where one of us has worked that day.  
We run like everyone else to the sea

and back again, tap sand from shoes on the footpath,  
embrace what's left out in every conversation  
when we part and know we're desolate when  
the driver of a tram calls out his stops  
to the solitary passenger.

\*

When I can escape my words no longer

or his voice that robs them of force, sounds, the  
child is cut out

for the spreading of her locks

know then  
that seldom

does a hand push and stop.

## THE TRAMONTANA

Off the coast the diver rests in his story  
and sparsely draws the cliff behind the beach.  
The wind cuts the story and wears and rubs  
the leaves from off the plane trees – the window frame.

I had the wind behind me for this story.  
The journey narrated a man walked over the mountain  
and the tale gets bogged down in the sea. The wind

lords it over his grave. And the diver is trapped  
among the stones, the helpers pop  
up and the wind crushes the swell and the sea.

The diver's painting wind gusts off the coast.  
The cliff's in bloom. And the grave is a step  
to the coral in a cavern on the bottom  
above the colour engraving of the flower curtain.

\*

The window opens a crack  
and the table to here  
breaks  
at once

and the table's not by the window  
but has moved next to me here  
at the foot of the table  
the cloth falls off the table

in the light of the window  
the leaf bends an arm's length  
a bar breaks at the elbow  
in the drawer: crumbs paperclips

the cardboard wedge that keeps the table  
straight and the window open

a shifting square over the table  
touches the ground in one piece.

\*

There is blood in your lips  
and yet the wind pipes

yet the tube rumbles  
under the table so much  
that your head slumps  
and even a faint word  
explodes in your ear

your hair is strewn  
across the cloth  
yet your eye opens  
and weighs in the lamplight  
the dust that vibrates in the air

and the stuff that descends on you  
too small for the table  
too fine for the wind.

## TO ACEDIA

She is where she saw him.  
(A sideways glance  
at the opposite lane.)

The case by his right foot.  
A coat over the arm.

He asks: was her hand ever here?  
He sits down on the upright case.

A hand burns on her abdomen  
and a hand burns above  
the revolving car tyre in the sun.

She wipes spittle from her lips.  
She brushes sunlight from his suit.

When on her knee a filter cigarette  
sticks into the opening of a matchbox,  
she sticks a hand into her sweater's V-neck.  
Her fingertips on the collarbone.

A pin on his suit. (Milk from the searchlight.)  
Socks with fine stripes in. Thumb edge under a brooch.

A smile in a hankie kneaded to a yawn.

*Nothing escapes her.*  
*No one escapes her.*

A tea towel with no motif.  
A loaf with no oven.

I think those birds are just right for a boat trip like this  
she says and on the railing  
her hand masks the graffiti.

She has a dress round her neck.  
The make-up's the day before's.  
A gust of wind and her ear lobe's released.

His mouth seldom tastes  
of the bunk in the hull.  
Birds are tapping against the frame.

## NAAR ACEDIA

Ze is daar waar zij hem heeft gezien.  
(Zijdelings een oogopslag  
in de tegengestelde rijrichting.)

De koffer aan zijn rechtervoet.  
Een jas over de arm.

Hij vraagt: is haar hand hier geweest?  
Hij neemt plaats op de staande koffer.

Een hand brandt op haar onderbuik  
en een hand brandt boven  
de draaiende autoband in de zon.

Ze veegt speeksel van haar lippen.  
Ze slaat het zonlicht van zijn pak.

Als op haar knie een filtersigaret  
in de opening van een lucifersdoos steekt,  
steekt ze een hand in de v-hals van haar trui.  
De vingertoppen op het sleutelbeen.

Een speld op zijn kostuum. (Melk uit de schijnwerper.)  
Sokken met fijne strepen. De duimrand onder een broche.

Een glimlach in een zakdoek gekneed tot een geeuw.

*Niets ontgaat haar.*  
*Niemand ontgaat haar.*

Een theedoek zonder motief.  
Een brood zonder oven.

Bij zo'n boottocht vind ik die vogels toch wel passen  
zegt ze en op de reling  
bedekt haar hand de graffiti.

Ze heeft een jurk om haar hals.  
De make-up is van de vorige dag.  
In een windvlaag komt haar oorlel vrij.

Zelden smaakt zijn mond  
naar de kooi in de romp.  
Vogels tikken tegen de lijst.