

One of Holland's most promising young poets today

The poetry of Mustafa Stitou

WHEN MOUSTAFA STITOU made his debut with *Mijn vormen* (My forms) in 1994, he was the first Dutch poet of Moroccan origin to publish a collection with a major publishing house. This might have helped a bit in raising extra attention to his work, as did the fact that he was only nineteen years old when he published it, but the most important reason for the sensation that *Mijn Vormen* caused, can merely be attributed to the unusual tone of voice the poet displayed in it, combined with highly original images and points of view.

His debut collection was nominated for the C. Buddingh' Prize, the most important Dutch prize for first collections of poetry. In 1998 *Mijn gedichten* (My poems) followed and two years later both collections were republished in one volume. His most recent collection, *Varkensroze ansichten* (Pig pink picture postcards), was published in 2003. It was immediately recognized as his best work so far and marked his position as one of Holland's most promising young poets today. Soon after its publication, *Varkensroze ansichten* was selected as the 'best collection of Autumn 2003' by the Dutch Poetry Club. And a few months later, in May 2004, it was awarded the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize 2004.

The poet himself also regards this third collection as his best until now: 'My debut was uninhibited, but it contained poems that were not really rounded off. In the second collection, the poems were more flawless and light-hearted, but I overtaxed the experiment. I've eased back with this collection: I've combined the candour of the first book with the precision of the second.'

In general, Stitou distinguishes himself by means of a phenomenal application of language in which emotion and intellect enter into a rare bond. He tacks easily between reality and imagination, irony and commitment, humour and seriousness – with all their ambiguities, invariably wrapped in dazzling forms. He is also an excellent reciter and performs at literary events and festivals throughout the country and abroad.



photo Roeland Fossen

Mustafa Stitou (b. 1974, Tetouan, Morocco) works and lives in Amsterdam. He published his first collection, *Mijn vormen* (My forms), in 1994 at the age of nineteen. In 1998 *Mijn gedichten* (My poems) followed and two years later both collections were republished in one volume. His third collection, *Varkensroze ansichten* (Pig pink picture postcards; 2003), was awarded the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize in 2004, marking Stitou's position as one of Holland's most promising young poets today.

Everything that catches his eye can be used as a theme. He ties it up, pulls it tight, and displays his product to the reader as a jewel.

MARIA BARNAS in *DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER*

The conceivable and the inconceivable are equalized. 'The underlying is what shows itself,' writes Stitou. It is the rich breeding ground of these luxuriantly thriving poems.

PAUL DEMETS in *KNACK*

Stitou is being called the most important poet of his generation.

NICO DE BOER in *NOORDHOLLANDS DAGBLAD*

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STITOU ABROAD

Stitou performed on many international stages and his poems have been translated and published in anthologies and magazines in Germany, England, France, Hungary, Indonesia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Slovenia, South-Africa and Sweden.



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Sample Translation

Poems

by Mustafa Stitou

(Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij)

Translated by David Colmer
and Willem Groenewegen

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MV: Dutch original from *Mijn vormen* (My forms), Arena, Amsterdam 1994

MG: Dutch original from *Mijn gedichten* (My poems), Vassallucci, Amsterdam 1998

VA: Dutch original from *Varkensroze ansichten* (Pig pink postcards, De Bezige Bij 2003

*) : Previously published in translation in *Carapace*, no.53. Snailpress, Cape Town 2005

Followed by ‘The absolute must be undermined’: an interview with Mustafa Stitou

For additional information on Mustafa Stitou and other Dutch poets, please also visit:

- The poetry pages at the NLPVF website:

<http://www.nlpvf.nl/p/>

- The Dutch domain of Poetry International Web:

<http://netherlands.poetryinternationalweb.org>

Voorvaderen, onderburen

Sommige voorvaderen, weten we, hebben God gedroomd
en daaruit is voortgekomen onze wereld van eindige dingen.
Zij waren het die ooit een kind offerden aan iets almachtigs
en onzichtbaars.

We weten ook dat sommige honden –
Dat sommige mensen gaan lijken op hun huisdier
na verloop van tijd. Soms
een grotesk gezicht, meestal blijft het onopgemerkt.
Mijn onderburen, een kinderloos stel toevallig, nemen
mijn boodschappen altijd aan en vragen mij fluisterend
of zij mij niet tot last zijn en soms ergens mee kunnen
helpen.

Andere voorvaderen wisten zich met de dood geen raad
en met geboorte evenmin, zij zagen in een pasgeboren kind
een gestorven voorvader. En het verwarde geloof dat
zij stichtten spookt sindsdien door onze genen;
mijn onderburen hebben mij toevertrouwd te zullen en willen
reïncarneren in een diersoort met zachte zeden, in bijen.

Forefathers, downstairs neighbours

Some forefathers, we now know, dreamed God
and from this our world of finite things came forth.
It was they who once offered a child to something
all-powerful and invisible.

We also know that some dogs –
That some people begin to resemble their pets
after a while. Sometimes
it's absurd to look at, mostly it goes unnoticed.
My downstairs neighbours, childless as it happens,
always hold my shopping and ask me in a hushed
voice whether they're bothering me and if they can
help.

Other forefathers were at a loss what to do with death
or birth for that matter, in every new-born child they saw
a dead forefather. And the confused faith they founded
has been haunting our genes ever since;
my downstairs neighbours have confided to me they will
and wish to reincarnate as mild-mannered animals, as bees.

(Translation: Willem Groenewegen)

Typical

Days after the circus sun
on sidewalk cafés makes good
on marriage as a prospect,
the four-eyed Japanese giggles
two-faced into a camera
full of street organ, uniforms
all smiles for a f-f-firing-squad-
stuttering refugee, Maghrebi,
surreptitious, hissing smack,
coke, ecstasy, swallowing when he sees
her, on Father's thick umbilical cord,
hijacked mouth that's headscarf-framed,
frozen with the rest by the film
school second year while in the bar
a woman, sociable and functional,
45 years young, seeks ditto man,
but he's in Amsterdam's narrowest thoroughfare
unable to take his eyes off a wayward dildo
between the breasts of a faded Venezuelan who,
sexy and sad, sneers at the sight
of two energetic indifferent boys
French kissing, trembling granny swears
because there's never any letters,
but this evening she'll see the queen,
she never forgets Remembrance Day,
and the philosophy student will smirk
at the speech after beating the odds
yet again by not drowning in the canal
where tour boats treat tourists to
mellifluous emetics and pigeons shit
shit shit shit all over
the station or ungratefully

peck seeds from the square,
know they're admired, don't care,
like the junkie in the tram
caught with his hand in a pocket
by committed commuters whose outraged
innocence beats the intern chafing
at the driver's one-liner about the house
on your left where J. puts his feet up
in the summer, deliberately
asks for guilders and doesn't get a thing
or notes or a cigarette from the Italian,
who just fingered a red-hot schoolgirl
in the toilet and another child off
on adventures in the department store
hears his name at last and that
his mother (in the Society Shop, madame
does not doff her shades, the frames, you see)
is waiting (where'd they say again?) while he's
all smiles for glumly nodding officers,
sunbed-bronzed, beating their way
to a frisk in the park, where the poet,
where the poet, after research
in death notices, carves his name
in a bench, reconsiders, carves his name
in every tree in the row –

(Translation: David Colmer)

Somewhere Café

Somewhere on Rembrandt Square, sidewalk café:
the concrete heat, godless togetherness

with each new round I mumble
true to custom, head of froth
into my beer bismillah

I am the young Moroccan
and his foreign-speaking thinking

Threadbare from holiness
the banner in my father

and mother reminds me more
and more marginally of my birthland:

rock shelter since I'm normal here

But still biannually in summer
month of little meaning

beach sown with orange umbrellas
and thousands of parents

who wouldn't have known
the man I've now become, about whom

I fantasize.

(Translation: David Colmer)

Cinema

in a time
of all-consuming drought
in a time
when a farmer does his sums
takes straw to a car
abandoned on his land

father leaves as a child
with his uncle the deserter
for nine pesetas in the back
of the camionera – armpits
off the metal – going to Tetouan,
tiny Tetouan with its reliable souk

in the rigour of the mosque's austerity
they pray sluggish and sighing
after jobs in gnawing sun
drink water from the water seller
with the sad grin and cool off
in the Spanish cinema with sunflower seeds

it rained in the movie
Allah el Akbar it rained
rain rain rain and I thought
rain was falling everywhere outside
evokes Father fidgeting
with the remote control

outside
stone trembles
wind melts
lips harden to beaks
and people die
that sun-drenched summer

(Translation: David Colmer.)

Pigheaded

- So, what do we see?
- A rabbit of course!
- A rabbit. And?
- And? I see a rabbit.
- And also a...
- I told you, a rabbit!
- Duck.
- Duck?
- Ears, bill, see?
- I only see a rabbit.
- And a duck.
- A rabbit!
- Duck!
- Rabbit!
- Rabbit rabbit rabbit!

(Translation: David Colmer.)

Anton

Left, a slender gold-haired goddess –
she didn't deign to notice me.
I brushed it off: since 9/11
there hasn't been much call
 for Arabs. Right,
a couple: her, oversized, pockmarked face,
a purple velvet evening dress – it had a certain
charm. So when the boyfriend went off somewhere,
we got to talking; she worked, she said,
in casting; she'd spent the afternoon
on a new Dutch mini-series,
 casting local Nazis.
Ah, my Jewish fiancée and I,
you can see us growing older and fatter together,
delighting more and more in eating and
in sleeping. When the boyfriend came back,
he kissed her naked shoulder while staring hard
at me. The slim blonde on my left,
as I now noticed, had a tattoo
right across the back of her neck:
 Anton^{*}
it said,
in calligraphy,
between two hearts.

(Translation: David Colmer.)

* First name of the leader of the Dutch National Socialist Movement,
A.A. Mussert (1894-1946).

Mother Tongue

Cr-ksh

Cr-ksh

Cr-ksh cr-ksh

Cr-ksh

(Ewes, ewes, are you coming?)

(Goats, goats, are you coming?)

h-tch h-tch

h-tch h-tch h-tch h-tch

h-tch

h-tch h-tch h-tch h-tch

(You coming, cow?) haash

haashhaash

haash

haash

(Cat) bshbsh

bshbsh

bsh

bshbshbsh

(Wishing the dog

to drop it get lost

she shrieked)

eh-dep!

eh-dep eh-dep!

eh-dep!

(Translation: David Colmer.)

Once, I had this vision: in a cavern
centuries before Christ a temple prostitute
submissively sucks off a high priest,
eyes gleaming in the dark.

This evening I watched a Darwinist documentary
on Discovery Channel and heard a sanctimonious sentence.

In a different temple a different text has been found.
Six legislators have already been slaughtered.
The high priest knows he too will be
slaughtered: bet on the wrong god, on a god
without a body.

Death, the sentence went,
is the price that is paid
for having sex.

(Translation: Willem Groenewegen.)

Anecdotes, revelations

Blazing past a pale-blue wrack of cloud
the angel Gabriel probably
in search of a place to descend
to whisper into someone's ear. Sokurov
the film director, lazy visionary:

a young, pallid, absent-mindedly peering bodyguard
suddenly catches sight of his Führer
hastily standing up from behind a boulder
has probably taken a dump
looking round nervously rubs
his hands clean with snow.

The woman who first espied the angel
howled like a lunatic, thus driving off
the angel, unwittingly. The woman froze.
She froze.
But not as punishment.

The astonishment on the pallid face of the boy,
his Führer hastening toward the rest of his company
having a copious picnic further on, against a background
of snow-covered mountain tops, wisps of fog and gorges.

(Translation: Willem Groenewegen.)

Sometimes a woman decides to lie down on the bed
and to get up when she knows what's the matter,
has put into words what is
disengaging her, where
where a cleft is beginning.
Sometimes the woman gets up in a minute. Stays there,
for an hour. Sometimes half a day.

Sometimes a traveller arrives in a town
that for some reason or other surprises him.
The manners of its inhabitants, the splendour, light fall,
the rhythm food is it the accent there is something
that makes everything purposeless in a way –
the traveller decides to leave the town when he
understands the town. This can take years. Sometimes
he doesn't ever leave.

Sometimes a child decides to look at pictures of its mother
until it knows what sort of woman and why.

A mystic and his god. A painter and his model.
The painter finds a way to say it in silence
or goes mad. Years later a shepherd
finds the mortal remains of the mystic.

(Translation: Willem Groenewegen.)

Took a bite on a beautiful
day from a beautiful strangely
beautiful actually plant. Since then
our mouths have been horribly itchy.

Where Rose lives I cannot go.
So don't tell anyone, promise?

We found the rabbit in the woods its pelt
was covered in blood Rose said
kissed by a wolf
only joking! bitten by us!

We dug a hole. Stroked the soft dead ears.

I still remember exactly where it is!
There is a bump on the ground.
And we stuck a beautiful branch
into the ground.

(Translation: Willem Groenewegen.)

Affirmations

I can stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I'm neither fat nor small nor round
I have a soft dick lots of love in my pigeon-breast

I no longer fear your wrath father I fear your wrath
no longer father your wrath is naturally cloudy

the hidden is not the hidden father
it is the radiance on animals people things
so why pray on your knees
when I myself am the prayer?

I can stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I'm neither fat nor small nor round
I have a soft dick lots of love in my pigeon-breast

nietzsche grieved for what he destroyed and went mad
darwin became a machine in old age I have
a soft dick lots of love in my pigeon-breast I can
stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I'm neither fat nor small nor round

farewell false teachers of old I'll grow a belly
on which tomorrow I'll tattoo one corinthians thirteen
more excellent way of love verse four five six and seven

I can stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I'm neither fat nor small nor round
I have a soft dick lots of love in my pigeon-breast

from the world I cannot fall my strange mother
always picks me up

when I look into my jewish fiancée's eyes
butterflies flutter in and out of my mouth

I can stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I'm neither fat nor small nor round

I can stop smoking it's not a fiasco
comfortless as libian state television

it's not a fiasco I'm a biological fact
but I can masturbate
masturbate out of nostalgia and I draw
as I drew seven winters old

I can stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I'm neither fat nor small nor round

it's not a fiasco that I'm a finite body
this afternoon on the tram I saw
a child
with a roman-emperor-head

farewell false teachers of old it's not a fiasco
I have a soft dick lots of love in my pigeon-breast

lots of
love

I can stop stop smoking and even if I don't manage
I love myself I am fat
I am small
I am round

(Translation: Willem Groenewegen.)

Mystery

1

A small crumbling wall in the middle of the square
dates from the eighth century, according to the slaughterers.
On the site of this wall the first converts celebrated
the feast of sacrifice with their first proper offering.

The magnificent killing room (art nouveau elements) was built
by a rich French family at the turn of the twentieth century;
the slaughterhouse was just outside the administrative centre.
Since the departure of the former coloniser some fifty years ago
much has happened, the town centre has expanded enormously,
the population has exploded,
but the slaughterhouse is still there.

A town council with a modicum of vision would renovate
this magnificent slaughterhouse (leaving the ruin untouched)
and reinvent it as a museum or something similar,
so that at least some of the objects unearthed
by American archaeologists could escape shipment –
finding an attractive destination here instead.

2

A museum would be a tremendous improvement because
the scenes are macabre: barred rattletraps loaded
with unsuspecting halal stock sputtering past grocers
and internet cafés on their way to the slaughterhouse.

Hot days with the sickly smell of blood hanging
over the town like a bell jar. The desperate
bellowing of cows that suddenly seem
to understand their fate. Feral dogs
wandering down shopping streets.

A slaughterer in a blood-smeared coat and
blood-smeared waders, panting but imperious,
passing silent shoppers, pushing a wheelbarrow
stacked with innards –
not at all conducive to mass tourism,
which really is this region's only hope
of ever amounting to anything.

Truly, it's a mystery that steps are never taken.
You'd almost think the council is bewitched
and every new generation falls anew under the spell
of a small consecrated wall, a ruin of no account.

(Translation: David Colmer.)

An interview with Mustafa Stitou

The absolute must be undermined: Mustafa Stitou forces a clash of concepts

by Ron Rijghard
(April 2, 2004, NRC Handelsblad)

translated by George Hall

In his conversational poetry, Mustafa Stitou mixes the commonplace with the sublime. 'In the hope that it will effervesce in the reader's head.'

In 'Het zingen vergaat je' (No Urge to Sing), the first poem in Mustafa Stitou's collection *Varkensroze ansichten* (Pig-pink Picture Postcards), first-person narrator sits down in the outdoor café of his French hotel: 'The proprietress, / notably unfriendly. My complexion probably did not appeal to her, and my name, / which I mentioned when checking in, / undoubtedly clinched it. Mustafa.'

In his apartment on the third floor of a building in Amsterdam, the young poet (1974, born in Tetouan, Morocco, raised in Lelystad) narrates: 'I deliberately introduce the name Mustafa several times in the collection. I'm not referring to myself, but rather to the name Mustafa. To many people, that name says something about my essence, and evokes all kinds of associations as well as prejudices. Two or three of the hijackers on 11 September were called Mustafa. To Muslims, it is one of the two most cherished names, Mohammed being the other. That is why there are so many of them. Muslims associate the name with purity and faith. My name makes people think I have more in common with Mohammed than with Heidegger. But the opposite is true.'

It was not without reason that Mustafa Stitou exchanged his study of Arabian History for a study of Philosophy. Now he is a poet: 'To me, poetry is the ideal way of thinking.' He began to gain renown as a poet during his study period. He made his debut when very young, in 1994, with *Mijn Vormen* (My Forms). The collection was enthusiastically received and celebrated as the first poetry by a poet of Moroccan origins. He partly discarded the laconic and candid poetry of the teenager ('I felt free') when writing *Mijn Gedichten* (My Poems), which was published in 1998 ('I deliberated too much, planned too much'). His third collection, *Varkensroze ansichten*, which combines the best of the first two publications ('I'm communicating again), appeared at the end of last year.

Subtle web

In the meantime, the collection has nominated for the VSB Poetry Prize and looks like the favourite for the award, which will be announced in May. Each of the five selected collections has a strong philosophical or poetic tint, but none of them equals the uninhibited, light touch that Stitou demonstrates. [As predicted, the VSB Poetry Prize 2004 was indeed awarded to Stitou, TM.] His style, which he himself refers to as being 'chatty', is loose and all-embracing without losing its precision. Stitou can be efficient, observing and amusing, as well as repetitive and overwhelming or didactic. In compositional terms, the collection is compact. Islam and Darwinism, East and West, Arabs and Jews, the holocaust and clones, fathers and sons: they all form a subtle web of thematic lines.

'Het zingen vergaat je' is a remarkable opening poem for a poet who indicated that he finds it irritating when his Moroccan background becomes a topic of discussion. 'In the past few years, the gap between immigrant and indigenous has grown. One currently refers to Dutch people of Moroccan origin simply as Moroccans. I can't escape that', he explained his reversal. 'I was completely confused by 11 September. Reality was extremely politicized. Prior to that time, I wasn't particularly productive, but I didn't write any poetry at all in that year.' The fact that people again began to think compartmentally led him to reflect on how people regard one another. 'To me, identity is a question of putting on masks and, in particular, of having masks put on you by other people. That idea resounds through the collection.'

The first-person in the poems is not only occasionally called Mustafa, he also refers to himself as being a 'conceptual-anecdotal, at the very least an anti-metaphysical poet' and someone with a 'love for the conceptual'. But what is a conceptual-anecdotal poet?

'The conceptual element of my poetry is the fact that I stage the situations. This is a reasonably spontaneous activity. To me, poetry is an adventure. I do not conceive everything in advance. I put heterogeneous things on the table and move them around. Then I knead an anecdote around them, which I narrate as if I were in the pub. It excites me to write a poem with, for example, the words '11 September', 'Arab', 'golden goddess', and 'NSB'. This was how the conceptual-anecdotal poem 'Anton' was generated. All those words carry their various charged meanings, and I place them in a commonplace setting.'

He calls this preference for grouping 'a personal obsession'. 'It is a question of evocation: evoking the banal in the sublime, the unutterable. You can't write a poem about 11 September. There are no words for that. What you can do, however, is to allow such charged concepts to clash with one another in the hope that it will begin to effervesce in the reader's head.'

‘There are people who read my collection and say: these are stories, not poems, that’s not what I’m looking for. But my poems only work if there is a certain sensitivity to ideas, religion, art, the soul, death, mystery. On the other hand, I do want to write lines that sing out, like: ‘As desolate as Libyan state television.’

Stitou explains his ideas on the basis of ‘modern sensibility’ combined with his background. ‘I was raised in Islamic tradition, but by the time I reached twelve I had lost my faith.’ The germ of his disbelief lay in a video tape that his family had, which contained a long, vehement sermon by the imam. ‘The imam tripped over a word. That was shocking. Everything changed. His entire sanctity, his whole authority was unmasked. His words did not come from another world, but from this one. That was shown in something as simple as a slip of the tongue. Since then I have realized that Islam continually belies its pretensions. The system does not hold water, Islam does not have all the answers. That’s where my obsession with the commonplace comes from. The absolute ought to be undermined.’

Stitou’s manner of working is clearly visible in the poem ‘Afstudeerproject’ (Graduation Project). The first-person narrator presents his poems, in which he unites ‘the unutterable with the banal’, to his Jewish fiancée. She is busy with her thesis on the Holocaust but is suffering from writer’s block. Suddenly inspired, she jumps out of bed to work further, leaving the poet with frustrated sexual yearnings. Stitou: ‘In the meantime, they have skipped the Holocaust. It is similar to a situation where, at a congress, a group of men have heard a series of edifying, moving speeches and then move to the bar and try to seduce the nicest internee. Most people find it too difficult to remain serious for some time, people have little talent for the sublime. That’s only possible with violence, either physical or emotional.’

There is a lot of emotional violence in Islam, there is the threat of exclusion, he claims. Even now he is still busy trying to escape from the emotional pressure. ‘There is a splendid passage in *Gesloten Huis* by Nicholaas Matsier [a Dutch author, TM] in which he talks about going to church with his parents when he is a student, even though he had abandoned his faith when he was thirteen years old. When he tells his parents the truth, his mother bursts into tears. He feels relieved but also something of a coward. I recognize myself in this passage. I have never been able to openly discuss my lack of faith with my parents, I could only show it. My parents tried everything during my adolescence – asking if I had said my prayers, mentioning that I disappointed them, that I was a nail in their coffin, etc.’

In Stitou’s opinion, many young Muslims struggle with a similar dilemma. ‘I am sure that that do not believe that Islam can answer all their questions. They feel a kind of confused loyalty to their parents, in combination with a superficial, half-hearted religious perception. Ach, all those girls with headscarves. Is there a run on religious writings? It is just a huge identity crisis.’

There's nothing wrong with a world without God, Stitou maintains. 'A hundred years ago, people claimed that, without God, all certainties in life would disappear, there would be no basis for our moral system, the world would lose its beauty. The opposite is true. Islam wants to curtail and demolish the feeling of wonder. To me, beauty and wonder precede religion. I can surprise myself with all kinds of commonplace things simply because they form no part of a system.'

Darwin

In his latest collection, Stitou explores the modern answer to religion: science. In the person of Charles Darwin, the man who formulated an alternative for the origins of man. 'If you're talking about tradition and modernity, about religion and the Enlightenment, about science – and if you want to make that the theme of your collection, then Darwin is extremely important.'

In 'Het zingen vergaat je' there are the lines: 'And keeping in mind that we are all descendants/ of the same clique that lived in Africa 170,000 years ago.' That is one side, the soft side, of Darwinism, says Stitou. In 'Bestseller', he presents another side. The short poem contains no more than the reminder that in the nineteenth century Darwin's book was particularly popular in Germany and that a catalogue or bibliography on 'Darwinismus' appeared every two years. By isolating that fact, Stitou manipulates the reader from *the survival of the fittest* to the Holocaust in one fell swoop. 'Darwin introduced a new way of looking. He extracted the soul from mankind. Darwinism was applied to underpin the differences between people and to legitimize the fact that the mighty could dominate the weak. There was no longer any respect for Creation. In a poem about Darwin, I also isolate the words: 'The conversations with top breeders – revelations.' Here, the world is inverted: it is no longer the angels who reveal things but the top breeders!'

In 'Shakespeare, misselijkmakend' (Shakespeare, nauseating), Stitou takes eight pages to narrate the life of Darwin point by point, larded with quotes from his autobiography. Darwin is called sarcastically 'Our Father'. Can he be regarded as a new substitute for God? 'Yes, but that is generally accepted, isn't it? Darwin is the Homer of science, a colossal figure. I was fascinated by that man. His autobiography contains all kinds of harrowing details that admirably illustrate the road he travelled – such as his love for poetry, which lasted until he was around thirty, for example. He had Milton with him during his voyages on the Beagle. But at the end of his life he tried to read Shakespeare and it made him sick. I think it was because he was busy rooting around in the fabric of Creation, day after day, for decades. It seems as if he had approached a secret beyond poetry. I am being dramatic, but I am excited by this thought and it resonates with other things in this collection.'

Stitou refers to a poem in which he and a colleague B. Zwaal are reciting poetry in Paris. 'If Darwin is Our Father, and he completely loses his interest in poetry, then it's not so very surprising that there are only seven people in the auditorium. And that interest for poetry is minimal in our culture.' But that can't be Darwin's fault? 'Yes, he should have kept on reading.'

Child sultan

Darwin's nineteenth century returns in 'De vreemdeling bestaat niet' (The stranger does not exist). Stitou describes an Eastern child sultan and a 'Western consul'. For this, he took material from Visser's *Vier schetsen van eene reis in het Oosten* (Four Sketches of a Journey in the East), published in 1896. 'Many things were started up at that time. The colonial attitude was predominant. If I write about discrimination I want to put it in context: in that Sketch, an Arab is called a 'two-footed creature' and is an 'excellent working animal', if supervised. At the same time, the child sultan is playing with his willie.' Of course, that willie represents many things? 'Ha ha, yes, but the important thing is the thoroughly degenerate ruling elite in the Arabic world. The West was ambiguous about the East. In contrast to that apathetic Arab you have the exotic enchanted world of the snake charmers and the storytellers.'

With this kind of poetry, Stitou wishes to sketch the background of modern thinking in terms of 'us and them'. 'Exoticism still exists. Marrakech? Beautiful city. Morocco? Fabulous country, the people are so hospitable. And that while Morocco has enormous unemployment, hospitals that don't function, immense corruption. The exoticism blocks the view of the tragic situation.'

Stitou believes that the news coverage on the King of Morocco is too benevolent. 'It is typical of the mood here. It must be a desperate situation, that the people are so grateful that the king has done a few good deeds. Great, the King isn't mad, he's OK!' The Moroccan king announced freedom and equality for women, among other things. 'That's something to celebrate, regardless of how ambivalent it is. But it is still a favour, issued by someone whose authority is based on his lineage. That is not a point of discussion, although that discretion is just as archaic and dogmatic as religion.'

In the poem 'Niet samen scheiden we licht en donker' (Not together we separate light and dark), Stitou shows how early colonial thinking continues to influence the first generation of immigrant workers. It is a hard and poignant poem, a speech by a son addressed to his father, accusatory, apologetic, and self-accusatory. See lines such as: 'fled from hunger and humiliation/ selected on brawn and teeth/ (...) anonymous bunch/ illiterate adventurers.' Stitou: 'Companies sent inspectors to Morocco to select men on their physical features. Nevertheless, that differs from the insensitive colonialism of the time before that. It was my father's dream to go to Europe, to earn money. There was nothing for

him to do in Morocco, no schooling, no future. Morocco puked out his generation. It was left to them to organize something: if you wanted to go, you could bugger off.'

At the same time, Stitou wants to amend the view of immigrant workers as god-fearing people. 'My father's generation is much more hedonistic and materialistic than is generally assumed. They only kneel as a matter of habit. Spirituality and faith are no more than veneer.'

Although he is continually searching for words, hesitates about his answers, doesn't raise his voice and makes a mild impression in everything, it is consistently apparent that he is pleased to provoke and is enthusiastic about goading people. See the title *Varkensroze ansichten* (Pig-pink Picture Postcards) and the cover depicting a pigskin. 'Ach, the fact that it is nonsense to regard a pig as an unclean animal is self-evident, of course. What I was wondering about was whether pigs are as pink as is claimed. Only when they are drawn do they acquire that childlike colour. The photograph on the cover had to be substantially processed, the pink was not pink enough by far. The cover gives the collection an unreal, artificial appearance and that harmonizes well with my poetry.'

The artificiality of his poetry is shown by his absurdist poems in which he allows himself to be led by coincidental discoveries, ready mades, which he processes, such as notes from his upstairs neighbour (her name is mentioned in the Notes, at the back of the collection, and is also on the bell panel) and the senior-citizens survey of the Health Care Services in the Province of Flevoland. And for those who are sensitive to conceptual-anecdotal items, above the computer in Stitou's room hangs a sheet of paper with female handwriting warning that the graduation thesis really must be submitted in the very near future.

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