

**Victor Vroomkoning**  
**Polar Bear Existence**  
**Poems**

*In memory of my parents*

## **Diligence**

I have experienced much.  
Since my very first day  
I have sought my parents  
in my parents until  
their glance this morning.  
I also lived many lives  
between wife and children,  
become ever better acquainted  
with the friends that I had.  
Meanwhile I travelled  
half the world inside my country,  
constantly changed addresses  
in my town and roamed through  
the four gardens of my  
garden. I looked in  
amazement at the slimy  
creature in my daily bath,  
reread my twenty books  
twenty times, rewrote  
my hundred lines of verse  
incessantly and loved  
as if I'd never loved before.



## **[I] Zero hour**



## **Economising**

Enough fantasising about us,  
you state, and would I like to save father?

I've been saving you both ever  
since my first line. Do I ever  
get enough out of both your lives?

Oh, parchment parents, your  
nails go on growing into  
my flesh, your silken hair  
hangs like cobwebs around me.

Don't talk to me about saving, mother.

## **Children**

Look they suddenly turn away  
from *The Bold and the Beautiful*  
when Ridge and Brooke kiss  
each other passionately.

The one starts humming,  
the other gets a fit of coughing.  
That's their behaviour

compared to that  
of my father (87)  
and my mother (93).

**Mr X**

Who I am, though,  
the kisser of your  
puckered mouth?  
Who its is who lifts your  
fragile bones onto a pillow?  
What the name of  
your hairdresser is?  
If I always snuffle like this,  
need a handkerchief?  
If I'll look in again?

Oh, my little wax mother  
– my dear relief –  
what do you think?



## **Sister**

'Got this pain, sister'  
Can see that, mother  
'My leg, sister'  
Yes, mother  
'What a deep voice you have, sister'  
Because I'm not a sister, mother  
'Have you got a beard, sister?'  
It's turning grey, mother  
'Why do you call me mother, sister?'  
What else should I call you, mother?  
'I'm not your mother, sister'  
Only just, mother  
'Got this pain, sister'  
I know, Mrs

## **Bl\*\*dy well**

Where are you? Wandered out  
the room again while I was watering  
your plants? Where are you hanging out,  
slob, gob, brawny ghost?

Forgotten again that you have  
to keep mum, not staggering  
up the roman corridor, choking  
against the skirting-board that you  
bl\*\*dy well, bl\*\*dy well will this and that?

## **Prayer**

Mother most meagre  
Mother most miserable  
Mother-of-a-thousand-wrinkles  
Mother-of-a-hundred-rifts  
Mother-with-the-seven-hair-moustache  
Mother of callouses  
Mother of bandages  
Empty vessel  
Fetid vessel  
House of straw  
Seat of stupidity  
Senseless flesh  
Blind mirror  
Dead star

Heavenly Father  
listen to Her on  
have mercy  
goddammit  
on Her

## **Fatherly**

Thought that he had had everything:  
war, another one, a dead son,  
a living one who all too long made him  
go on inhaling against death  
in verse, glazed from gazing  
in his intact years, but half ears  
from nearly a century of life.

But no, another navel had to  
be added, with a cord to  
an alien thing on his thigh,  
tears for a visibly lost  
capacity, *a new release*  
he apologises so quietly  
that it becomes a *decease*.

## **Zero Hour**

Father and I, we are the shrieking  
silent ones. I only have to  
whisper *mother*, and we are in  
for sixty minutes of ear-splitting  
silence. He was already a man of  
a few words, but since her death  
nothing more needs to be said.

From time to time you hear him swallow,  
see something gleam in his eyes  
but his face a mask of  
papier-mâché, his praying fingers  
a small bed of icy asparagus.

Behind him he marries her,  
his fingers twined in hers, his head  
inclined laughing towards her.

## **Twelfth Day**

I walk just one more time round  
the empty house, look inside. Can I see  
you kneeling there next to Caspar-  
with-the-seven-times-glued-head?

Every day you left them closer to  
the child, you were their star.  
For three weeks they left the attic  
with you via the sun lounge

to the crib on the box. Your faith  
lay in your deeds. With table-cloth,  
curtains, mother's petticoat you  
transformed us into wise men.

Imagination children get from fathers  
who remained children of fathers.

## Queeste

Seduced in Bruges by a head; it  
plunged into a fashion house, I looked  
and looked for someone it could fit. Walls  
raised mirrors round me to delude me.

It mingled amongst stalls at the market,  
I pretended to be interested in the wares,  
still kept the face in sight, picked up  
a scarf or tie or bag as alibi.

pretended to deal with those who sold,  
I roamed around until the darkness fell.  
The yellow heavenly thing kindled its light

when the person followed unexpectedly appeared  
in front of me. *I've been looking for you for so long*  
I heard her saying my dead mother.

## **[II] Loves**





## **Moons**

The moon is full, my love,  
the high-tide sea leaps up  
the shore, your lap was  
twice ungraspable when  
like moons in your darkness  
the light lay in the wild of the sun  
which in the full moon climbed  
out of the night.

Let us go swim in the sea,  
feel how strongly moons  
tug at your life.

## **Short-sighted**

What is it, that staring at the white  
wellies of your daughter you will  
never more forget how the young  
legs of her mother stood in them  
when she married you,

that in a distant drawer you re-find  
yourself as your son, through  
the lenses of your glasses feel his  
eyes becoming sharp?

Despair that goes on growing,  
hope that you get the better of it  
in the margin of a poem?

## **Answer**

She never says no  
because she knows that  
that gets in my way.

She wants to see me  
fail without her having  
held me back.

But if I succeed,  
how big she becomes  
because through her  
yeses I could grow.

## **Dialogue**

I'll tell her tonight,  
I thought one afternoon drinking my tea.  
But how, precisely when for  
night sometimes takes half your life.

Before we slowly sink into  
ourselves, it welled up in me.  
But would her head not then be  
more for hearing sweet nothings?

Better to have sought the emptiest moment  
so as to speak as a thief about  
appearance and reality, or waited until

her last dream has been hushed away  
and she turns round, kisses me into  
daily light for form's sake?

## **Parnassus**

I would like to mount her  
one more time, unfurl  
the impassioned poet

but rediscovered myself  
as Walter van de Laar\*

fifty-eight, almost on early  
retirement, teeth-chattering  
he came

*\* The name under which Victor Vroomkoning  
is officially registered*

## **Recession**

With infatuations it's like it  
is with life: they succeed less  
and less. How significantly  
they began: feelings of giddiness,  
queasiness, languishing looks,  
desire to share death. And then alone.

A slow recovery, once more seeing trees  
and shrubs standing, your old faithfuls,  
that took half a year in no time.

Gradually less and less unhappy  
happiness, a few weeks or so all told,  
you stay looking pretty good,  
make a quick note: how many children?

Infatuation not much more than an  
innocent emotion: you clear  
your throat, wipe your nose, simulate  
a sob or two and proceed to the order  
of the Sunday deed.

## **Being a poet**

Please now, stop waving your legs around  
in broad daylight. I've still got a poem  
to go to that wants finishing.  
Oh yes, another one about love.

Stop it, will you. Take away my arm  
from you before it can't write any  
more. Of course it's about you.

Yes, I can see too that you're not  
over there but here. How long is it already  
you've been familiar with your poet?  
Distance, madam, distance!



## **Library**

Like the way she would size up her  
favourites, her head slightly on one side,  
her eye mild, her lips sometimes  
mumbling, sometimes pursed as  
for a kiss, her ring-finger lightly  
stroking the backs, the s-  
curve of her body bulging with  
sssh...really, Silence!

so do I wish she would size me up  
when I incarcerated in myself  
with my back towards her  
languish among the other for  
my umpteenth turn for reading.

## **Ode**

Just now the news  
of a friend who has  
dropped down dead.  
You offer your condolences.

After which you are seized  
by a vast attack of  
randiness. You screw  
and curse and pound.

## **Just as**

If you find me old,  
too old for me to do it  
with you one more time, then  
take my photo in your  
hand and say: yes,  
that's how you were, you are,  
young, dear, gentle, strong  
and then come to me,  
shut your eyes and do  
it with me just as  
you did it with me  
yesterday, the day before,  
the day before that.

## **And what?**

And what if I slept?  
And what if I slept  
and dreamt? And what  
if I slept and dreamt  
I lay in heaven?  
And what if I slept  
and dreamt that you  
lay there beside me?  
And what if I slept  
and dreamt that I did  
it with you in heaven?  
And what if I woke up  
and saw myself  
doing it with someone else?

*After S.T. Coleridge*

## **Evening of life**

God helps. Whenever you realise  
that the dear lines of your  
Love furrow, her skin  
becomes like crackleware,  
you recall ever more clearly  
how generously she once gave herself  
to you, he softens your eye.

If love made blind, you now stand  
staring long-sightedly at her:  
the closer the less the

obstacle. The ear assists  
too: how hardness of hearing  
makes her snoring bearable.

## **Love**

Gluing the rear inner tyre of my bike  
I feel your hand of yesterday  
feeling loose the buttons to my heart,  
how you nuzzle up against my back.

caught up between the strumming  
of your fingers and the thudding  
of your temple, I rode you  
until dusk came.

The only thing that did not keep silent  
was the wheel in its gently  
wobbling resistance. Old and heavy  
we squeaked through the hinterland.

I stroke the glue round the small hole  
and wait until its dried to white.

## **Midnight**

A late mosquito's out for your blood,  
you feel immortally tired,  
you sleepwalk from chair  
to chair, move a book.

Then a shadowy, velvety ghost  
appears. He gives you back  
to who you once were.

### **[III] Open monuments**





## **Garden**

Garden once more a cream cake,  
here and there an awake  
crocus, small candle celebrating  
the passing of another year. Too  
beautiful to cut with a  
size forty-four.  
Even so, the fish under the  
fudge breastplate of the pond  
must be aired.

Once more back behind the  
warm sight-glass I count  
the eight that I left  
behind. Only when there's snow  
the squeaky-clean impression  
of my polar bear existence.

## **Pool**

Sometimes even less than nothing,  
an April afternoon, everything  
still young, friends that you  
invite outside once more for the  
first time, he blinking against  
the light, she in something  
transparent and a little later  
my eternal love  
who takes off her dress,  
engages the pool and I  
remain sitting, still  
shivering with winter, already  
shivering with spring.

**Schoonselhof\* [28 May 1997]**

*In memory of Herman de Coninck*

Ahead of the cortège as I know the route  
of my mother's, I stand on my poet's  
own in front of the yellow soil  
on which your back will rest.

The blue girths will presently  
be passed beneath you  
by your coffin-bearing friends  
so you can be let down.

That this meagre hole can accommodate you!  
You must have become half a  
man in accordance with your wish:

'Don't make much of it, reduce  
what you impart to the  
weight of half a poem.'

\* Cemetery at Hoboken (Antwerp).

### **La Roche\***

I spent ages looking for Perk's  
stone. When I found him I braked  
suddenly. An old Belgian came  
irately from his gaze. His gibber-  
ish went faster than his foot  
to the pedal. A ticket

instead of poetic lines  
at the Ourthe. 'I hasten to my  
beloved' I would find it hard to  
explain to four gendarmes as an alibi  
for my surprise behaviour. The next day  
the misadventure in the gazette which  
did me the honour that Perk deserved:  
'Hommage au poète Néerlandais'.

\* It was here, in July 1879, that the Dutch poet Jacques Perk (1859-1881) met Mathilde Thomas, as a result of which he was to write his famous sonnet cycle MATHILDE. In mark of recognition there is a commemorative stone in La Roche with the words:

'I hasten to my beloved, the blithe Ourthe  
Who receives me with laughter...  
*Jacques Perk*  
Hommage au poète Néerlandais.'

**Omaha Beach, *American Cemetery*\* [6 June 1944]**

Here they lie in marshalled ranks,  
they came, saw, fell  
not so much because they fought,  
more because the night brooked  
no more sleep, broad daylight came  
too soon, the tide too far,  
the beach too full, the land seemed  
too grim and they – seasick, scared,  
desperately courageous, disembarked  
from those they loved – could do  
little else than soaked through  
make for the barrels.

Here your son may well be or  
your husband or your would-be husband.  
Nine thousand or so crosses want  
you not to forget how anonymously  
he has taken to living.

\* Level with St.-Laurent in Normandy,  
where the allied invasion took place on 6 June 1944.

### **Panorama Mesdag [1991]**

You reach the top of a dune  
in 1881. Close by a net, a shoe  
from then, false enough very genuine. Farther  
off illusion of quiet life by the sea,  
accolades gulls above schooners  
of colour beneath a light of here and now.

The round postcard of cloth  
fourteen steps away  
deceives your kilometres.

Fixed ebb, ships in a desert  
of beach. Linen soldiers and fishermen  
who will never be able to put out to sea again.

No one who sees you, no hand  
that waves to you, bridging  
a century. It is a hundred years later  
than it is.

## **Dune**

See what stretches me:  
a vast fleshy  
hairy gleaming thing  
lit up by the sun.  
It breathes softly.

It is five 'o clock, the tide  
rolls in. Above the dune  
skims a kite, above  
her back my middle finger  
that prays the rosary  
of her spinal column.



## **Luxembourg**

You see him tinkering just  
before his old seventh day.  
Come on, today I'll try out  
my little miniature. He had  
had a vision of it since the  
first day, but then  
he was still too eager,  
most of all too unwieldy.

After five days of fitting and measuring  
a nowhere darted-out hand:  
small mountain, boulder, stream, water-  
fall: everything teeny, weeny,  
Small Switzerland, Great  
Little Duchy, the scale  
that of a replica.

**Delft, 14 September 1666\***

Beloved,

I heard that London was ablaze.  
I, too, am such. The lute you gave me  
now weighs heavy in my lap.

The master-artist I commissioned  
wanted gold and ermine  
round the secret soaring within me.

The maid and I fix  
each other's gaze, one silent  
about that which must remain unsaid.

Sixteen sixty-six we write  
but through Vermeer this letter  
between us gains immortality.

The curtain never falls, the light  
constantly brushes along that which  
closely portrayed lies open for you.

\* On seeing THE LOVE-LETTER by Johannes Vermeer.

## **The Belgian Ardennes**

Very encouraging of course  
all that therapeutic sparring:  
the one understands you, a second  
thinks along with you, a third  
strews some branches round you  
but all with that sombre  
grimace. Everything trickles,  
drips, snivels, steams and sops.  
Wood that wants to appease, heal,  
lives, waves but above all drizzles  
along with you. Not on your  
life no building worker's park where  
everyone happily noisily  
messes around a bit. No,  
here are introvert small rivers,  
small survival exertions, small feedback-  
relaxations. Intellectual  
wood – official language cultivated Dutch –  
under a bell-jar of eternal mist.  
And everywhere creatures that act  
the poet overcome with melancholy.

## **Fireplace**

I see myself in the garden,  
a faun peering in through  
the window-panes of the house,  
shades of hands around the eyes,  
an arrow of flesh in front.

Inside by the fireplace a man  
who looks at me. I spring  
from window to window, he follows  
me, both hands on his limb  
as naked as I can be.

### **At N., November**

We walk looking at what's no longer there,  
even the letters and the numbers that denote  
become erased.

Then a consignment of flowers in the sand, the ribbons  
sticky with the mist.

Tuck up your dress, I say.  
She unbuttons me and closes her lips  
around what beats and rises.

## **Open Monument Day**

Cautiously rise from  
down, execute stretch exercises,  
drop down into a bath,  
groom yourself with care,  
get into a three-piece  
suit, shuffle downstairs  
in patent leathers, eat  
a hearty breakfast, fasten  
the front door, install yourself  
in an armchair. Eleven 'o clock  
comes round: the inspection  
can commence.

## **D. Cemetery**

The hedge is ajar. Out of winter  
he comes closer, washed-out eyes,  
ice-thin hair, long nails for  
pointing. If I would just follow.

He coughs behind his hand as if  
not to disturb the dead. Open  
graves have ears, he indicates  
their status. No tomb was left

undesecrated here than the one before which  
he kneels. His coat falls open.  
Nothing that encloses him when he frees  
my name from the grey freestone.

## **[IV] Lessons in anatomy**





## **Grey heron**

In shabby dull-grey dinner jacket  
he strides through the ditch –  
startler, imitation stork,

a master who meticulously lifts his feet,  
inflates into a stiff clochard,  
lies in wait with angelic patience.

Flies with retracted neck,  
innocence-feigning fishing-gear.

## **Mole**

Frenetically she practises  
a tangle of tunnels  
towards it. Above ground  
her upthrown desire  
aired in small heaps  
that he will question her.

Wearing her sleekest fur-coat,  
in glittering-red slippers  
to the ball that  
– blind with love –  
she will never reach.

## **Bat**

Hangs itself up during the day,  
monkey-head towards the abyss.

By night a vampire,  
flesh stretched out  
over a kite-frame.  
All ears, it picks  
up what it sends,  
a flying radar control.

## **Mouse**

The breasts that he knows  
are twelve and forty-plus  
though daily close by.  
What's strange and distant fascinates.  
Aged nine he sits there at the  
mouse, the vital statistics are called  
Jane, Prudence, Christie.  
His printer produces them.

Then *Pussy* which his father  
when fifteen gave a glossy gleam  
between the sheets by the tiny light  
of his torch! He  
slept with bedroom-secret  
women, his mouse to hand.

## **Snail**

No matter how fast  
you want to love yet  
someone else,  
you drag along your  
sluggish self as well,  
your ossified  
having and hacking,  
belly-shuffler,  
humpback,  
lifelong  
mover

That is why  
you rhyme  
with trail.

## **Hens**

The trickiest thing is keeping  
them in the run. Agreed,  
put them together between margins  
of gauze and hope that this  
will do. On their perch  
as far as I'm concerned almost  
interchangeable. The cock I'm sure of.

But before you can be sure they  
are secure, the fox is on the prowl,  
they lose their heads, fly up  
in all directions. Words  
in a poem that lies open.

## **Poppy**

Orange-red crêpe paper round  
a cobweb duster on a stem  
of grey-white hair, it stands  
ablaze, aflame. Groaning  
and tearing in the wind,  
its skins hang in tatters,  
you find shreds left over.

The seed is blown away  
from within to help you  
to another world, only to  
return twice as profusely, to  
set fire to verge and flowerbed  
where as a shower of sparks cock-rose  
family does her best  
to resemble it.



## **Evening primrose**

In slow motion you interpret its  
dizzying unfolding.

In its yellow lustre it lights up  
the moon until the darkness yields.  
Relay-flower, it passes on the torch  
to its younger sister that higher up  
the ladder awaits the night.

## **The lesson in anatomy**

*For Jos van Abel*

Familiar with the dead body  
two-year-long doctrine after  
frog and guinea pig, how do you  
experience life during your first  
surgery? She is young and  
intact, the room intimate.  
You would be able to caress her,  
but your eyes are programmed to  
investigate, your hands are rubber,  
your tongue too a bit.

The blood that presses towards her  
cheeks you do not recognise from the  
corpse on the slab in the dissecting room.

## **Olivier Messiaen**

Suffered from synaesthesia,  
illness and imagery  
at the same time, heard colours  
like the first bird  
that reflected green  
saw when the wind stroked  
audibly across the waters,  
first music imitated  
by his throat.

The wind sang green,  
green sang the nightingale  
green stroke the violins  
of Messiaen, sweet-beaked  
among the creators.

Saw the colours which his  
fellow-creatures sang, fed them  
into flute, piccolo, triangle,  
recreated the lark,  
rebreathed the first sigh.