

# Dirk Van Bastelaere

**Original titles and publishers**

Hartswedervaren (Atlas)  
Pornschlegel & andere gedichten (Arbeiderspers)  
Diep in Amerika (Atlas)

**Translation** Dutch into English**Translator** Francis Jones

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## In hospital

Bared heart, let yourself be dragged, gasping for breath,  
through the mire,  
cold fledgling on the satin of a cushion  
blue as the dripping wound  
of Amfortas,

where the darkness yawns, deep  
in a gullet, nought between lungs,  
reamed with stinking russula,  
a sphincter which no longer shuts.

All that I am

is dragged round with this

given respiration under the lights  
of a hospital  
called love -

yes, that's what we believe.

# Looking at mountains

When the Swiss evening falls,  
backlit behind the billowing white of curtains  
the mountain's watching.

Its stare is the mucus  
in the heart of things  
that hounds us onward, hunted heart.

It's a swish  
of granite  
shifting slyly through our thoughts.

It lives in a hand  
casting itself like shadow  
across the bent back of a smiling man  
who's tucking his kids in bed or, late at his drawing board,  
drafting another facade of the world.

If you've ever looked at a mountain,  
the mountains will always be looking back,  
even if it's a wisp of mist,  
the sound of a cowbell, the scree  
that splits our attention in the moraine.

# The heart's heart

It's the heart's heart: heart attack,  
when matter hangs and crashes, shot  
through with black tissue, by which  
the body declares itself, to the house and  
its red-blooded habits or the walk  
by the freezing reservoir,  
to be sunken into its state of flesh,  
  
to be a muscle deserted by being so.

In its blue, the core of its collapse,  
the heart is like a beast that, in clammy  
exile from oxygen  
to the limits of its anatomy,  
is more than itself when dying  
and thus interwoven with the poem -  
which, attack after attack,  
presents itself to the passing and so  
again and again,

as death strikes the writing,

destroys its part of the world.

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# Fables of the sacred heart

1)

Those were days of cycling in the mountains. Of climbing, descending. Of enormous hunger for more and as long as they blocked the peak's virginity from view in their groaning scent of resin, pine trees acted out this problem to excess. But above the treeline you feel free.

Trundling along a stony track, Jesus kept catching the hem of his robe with his feet.

He'd missed the refreshment stations. Was the only cyclist on foot. The wind was ripping his raiment to shreds. Lightning roamed through his hair. We'd all cycled off somewhere else.

When he reached the bare, snow-covered peak, Jesus turned round, bewildered. No farmhouse. No place of emotion. No strong, ascetic birds. No-one had ever let him down as badly as Rilke.

That very second, Jesus saw his Father's dentures flash white in the valley. By way of a message, His teeth formed the words 'YOU SUCK'.

As tattered as the state of his calling,

Jesus pulled two ribs apart in the white, marble glory

of his body and, as the blood gurgled from his ribcage like a mudslide razing a mountain village, revealed his Sacred Heart to a nation of TV viewers.

We saw the drivenness of a kid who's crawled his life through sewers.

This was no Jesus. This wasn't the Corcovado Jesus. Not the Dear Lord who Speaks to us.

This was a mountain erupting out of its mountainness.

# Pornschlegel

It's July, and who would kill for a woman  
Now? It's so hot it's unreal. In the country:  
A farmyard with some old plante-trees, thirty  
In all. That's the age of the man who lives there,  
A lovely guy, though he limps a bit in one  
Leg, his left. Or so it would seem. Sometimes  
He walks on one shoe. Whenever he thinks  
About it he lies flat out on the floor, smashes  
The watery mirror in the rain tank  
Or turns his parents' photo on the sideboard  
The other way round and stares silently into  
Space. But now, as he looks up from the camp-bed  
Where he's lolling – the morning already a-quake  
With heat – on his forehead a couple of plasters still,  
Now, at this very moment, as he looks  
Towards the farmhouse, he sees the cherry orchard,  
A cloud of noise, a swarm of starlings dropping  
Into the trees, like grit. Is it a plague  
Or a message? Is it significant, a new  
Configuration? It hints at the branching of  
Another reality into one's everyday life.  
The starlings are starting to eat  
the cherries – they'll have  
The trees stripped bare in no time. But Pornschlegel  
The man has noticed nothing. He hears a motor  
Mower drone, only the garden sprinkler  
Hiss. Lethargic in the heat, sometimes  
He spells his name. Soon he'll embark on his voyage.  
Who would kill for a woman now? It's so hot.

He wanders into the room and yet another  
Century. He's still able to fritter  
Himself away in the familiar. 16th,  
17th, he yawns (it's the day before the great  
Heat, which will lie like a compress on the world),  
18th century. He looks out of  
The high window, sees the synagogue glitter.  
The colour sweated by things seems mental to him:  
Red of balcony flowers, blue of a patent  
Leather shoe. The museum, floating on the  
*Afternoon, is an Ionic island,*  
*Beautiful as a wreck from Paradise.*  
Inside, in half-light, the paintings and panels hang  
As concrete as the images of a poem.  
With all of this, Pornschlegel sometimes  
Feels more unreal than what is portrayed. Sees  
His foot dragging through the varnish of the  
Parquet floor. He stretches his diaphanous  
Hands before him: they are – still – his own.  
Any moment now, other hands might  
Appear in them. What's wrong with his physicality?  
The fact that he's guarding shadows of paint (Cranach,  
Memling, Patinir) is his daily bread.  
He's just an attendant. But one portrait, which he  
Worships, comes floating up in his dreams. It's Agnes  
Sorel. And he knows who she looks like too. Portrayed by  
Jean Fouquet as *virgo lactans*, she's an ivory  
Skittle, hairless face and slim loins.  
She's nature become idea and '*dame de toute beauté*  
*Parée*'. She makes him part of history.  
And in the already more evening light that's falling  
And falling through the dome, she's calling him  
To herself. The glass cracks and the century's empty.

He shuffles across the floor as if through water.  
Her voice, very high, almost a flute note and surely  
Guarded by seraphim and cherubim, comes  
Like a finger out of the paint. She beckons. He nods.  
She lisps and he sees her tongue, knitting-needle  
Thin – ‘See me or I perish’ – and he  
Hears: ‘Free me and inherit’. That he  
Has to break the glass to see the glass.  
He thrusts his pearl-white forehead into the case.  
He’s found stretched out and broken on the floor.  
And outside it’s even hotter, empty and dry.

Sleep shows him a man on the Left Bank.  
It seems like a dream in a dream in a dream.  
It’s a plain  
With the sun above. It’s there and sometimes not.  
The man walks across fields, across gravel. Along  
A wall with broken glass on top. Panting.  
He is searching or intending something.  
Then the path runs out and the ground gets boggy.  
He finds his way in circles to himself,  
His purpose becoming wound around him. He walks  
Past roots, between the stumps of trees –  
as if someone  
Had to cut them down to save his life.  
Here a phantom is someone there a walker  
Wearing calfskin boots, though now there’s a feeling  
He might be fleeing. By an orchard stands  
A scarecrow, straw-white hair sees blackbirds off  
To another world. Cars come driving across  
The landscape. The man has disappeared in a trice,  
Partially shielded by foliage. The site is cordoned



Off with palings and red-and-white tape. Someone  
Starts measuring something.  
It's crawling with black uniforms.  
Notes are taken and someone's digging too.  
A hand which is raised white, like a faux pas  
In a life, strikes every face dumb.  
They've found an oil barrel, welded shut.  
It's torched open. They bring a body bag –  
Clammy, in the garden, Pornschlegel  
Wakes. A catnap opens the doors of the dream.  
He dabs his forehead. But the trees greet him,  
Glasses throw out sparks. He smiles at phlox  
And gladioli in the border. He tidies  
Himself up in the pressure of the mirror.  
He kick-starts his Vespa. He needs to buy an axe.

He was as simple as a carpenter.  
He's anything but that now. In the course of events  
He was visited in dreams and now he's starting  
To believe that mumbo-jumbo of the  
Body. His home is draughty, an Aeolian  
Harp. The trees he has to cut down,  
It breaks his heart. He loves Italian disco.  
He says he's an island, la di la. They say  
He speaks in metaphors. A man who could be  
His brother says: 'He's been unbearable since  
Our parents died. He's become unsociable,  
An oddball'. He says he has an ever-changing  
Effigy. He sings when he's sad.  
La di la. La di la di la.

# Anja's Wardrobe 1

Where, caught out, the mirror cracked,  
Anja's wardrobe rises black as shoe polish.  
With the approval of none of the visitors  
It might have been put here one night.  
If Anja laces up her little boots, then someone  
*There* goes and does it too, but oh so smugly.  
If she puts on a scarf the door  
Tangles her. There's not a trace of wood  
Left on the wardrobe. It might have white  
Sheets, porno mags, cartons of custard inside,  
It absorbs things you like and does away with them.  
Anja's wardrobe now isn't what a wardrobe was.  
Since it appeared mousy-quiet in our lives  
They've been split into places. It takes  
The world to pieces. Devises a here,  
A there. Tomorrow morning, unless it's too late,  
When Anja's cigarette-end is already glowing,  
I'll have to carry it into the dripping garden.  
Pour petrol over it, before we  
Get caught, Anja and me, in all the kerfuffle  
Of Anja's wardrobe.

## Anja's Wardrobe 2

So malevolently complete, waxed

– As if no no-one in the world could smell it –

Anja's wardrobe wants to keep the line of the pillars,  
Sycamore, arcades, and how best to eat olives here.

The wardrobe is held together with lies: what lives

Has faded. It's noble to die. I can only go in a

Venetian doctor's mask. The inch-thick wood

A warning in itself: is it planning a spy-hole?

Her wardrobe gleams, but how meekly

Obscene is it on the inside? Anja's wardrobe is

Anja's life. So far, she's stayed

Inside, inside, inside.

# Three Men and the Sea

As long as I stand on the sea wall  
I can be seen from the window  
which will only let itself be known  
when the man has plunged right through it,  
for such is the thirst for knowledge.

Then someone imagines  
that through the churning white of the air  
I'm almost unrecognisable as a man by the lighthouse  
or as a boat fleeing the lee of the pier,  
the moment she closes the curtains.

Much later my body is recognised on the tarmac,  
in a posture known as twisted,  
for then I've stopped being thought of  
as having wanted to stand before the casino in a flapping, light-blue suit,  
a fair-haired man the equal of what he can do,  
while I was about to open a window  
which was asking just for that.

# Ariel and Jezebel

Who runs under orange skies  
along the cinder track and then  
runs with Ariel  
at ever receding suburbs,  
without having left  
the order of the liveable.

By the garden wall Jezebel stops,  
recoiling two steps backward.  
So far  
she only knows him from the sighs  
I heave at the sound of his name.

But she would let  
her boyish body be smeared with honey by countless hands  
to call Ariel  
upon her, in a swarm of bees.

In the meantime  
he remains in the patchy memory  
of the heat of a day which refuses to exist,  
except in the sprinting  
of someone  
who doesn't like sprinting.

# Lynx Time

Only after the dream-time  
does a summer's day dawn on me  
out of the alleged sharpness  
from which others wish themselves a refuge that doesn't exist as such.

Elsewhere the crystal of a chandelier,  
crashing down amidst  
what could have been  
the life and soul of a party,  
seeks another destination.

Just as lying awake at night turns  
over and over whilst listening  
for a car which doesn't swish  
along a rain-wet street.

Then, scarcely touched  
by dazzle, lynx comes  
snorting through summer,  
point-eared,  
on the run  
and tries, with bloody paws,  
to seek safety on what is called a candelabra cactus  
  
outside the shade.

# In a Drained Bathtub

It's an afternoon for throwing a javelin at the sun  
or, in a drained bathtub, hearing yourself beaten by Mahler's unworldly strings.

Someone declares that ears by Botticelli  
were softer  
than drawn by Mantegna.

A photo  
shows us  
the wonderful huts  
as the huts in flames.

You imagine yourself to be a javelin thrower.  
Even if people here go crazy  
with the echoes, it's good for us  
to be absorbed  
in the unliteralness of the signs, because things outside  
are wild and  
everlasting and  
empty.

Then the javelin quivers in the field of grass  
or rouged lips move along your thigh.

# The Return of the Body

Where I am a flower meadow  
is missing, even though I'm standing in  
a parched flower meadow  
with hair blossoming like an orchard  
in April.

But whenever I'm cut off  
from me by eyes,  
like that girl on the bird sofa under a vault of breathlessness,  
the body comes  
clumsily back and, in desperation  
or love  
for the kitchen table, lies shuddering on the kitchen table.

Then you think you know it's always there,  
even though you're putting your trust in the vacuum  
of a dream.

Someone sees all along that the jug, after pouring out  
hot water  
and being filled with cold water,  
breaks in two  
and stays broken in two.