



*Postcards from
Hilversum*

A poetry chapbook by Ruth Mark

“I woke on the border of some brand new country”

(from *An Outlying Station* by Roddy Lumsden)

For Max

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The Lesson

Nesting doves announce the morning.
Two of them crammed into the
bird house meant for robins, for blue tits.
Their tails hang over the ledge,
the sticks from many-aborted
nest-building-attempts bristle
spiky all around the wooden rim.
The whole house swings with their
weight, exposed to the elements.
Yet none of these hardships matter.
They're home, together and know it:
cooing contented tones fill
the morning, while we watch fascinated
learning a lesson in happiness, learning
how little possessions matter.

Condensed Windows

There's something inherently pathetic about condensed windows,
Water a fine patina, breath frosted across streaked glass
Here and there drops running jagged
Tooth-snarled lines down to the fungus-blackened seal.

I feel the water heavy in the air, my chest protests
And no amount of scraping, making waving movements
With the hand-held wiper will matter, the mist
Back as soon as I wipe it away.

Weeping windows surrounded by fairy lights
This cold December night, I cannot see out clearly
The streetlights are furry aureoles
Superimposed with a thousand inhuman tears.

Earlier, the air was thick with frustration,
A dampness on my soul of a completely different flavor
Yet also pathetic, futile, and as difficult
To wipe away as it is to eradicate this endless steam bath.

Condensed Windows won first place in Ritro.com's first poetry contest April 2003.

Stew Pot

He can waste time better than anyone
while she sits, guilt heavy
striving to work, to think - a luxury.

Miscellaneous noises emanate
from the bowels of the house
objects crash against cupboards, metal meeting wood.

And time flies with rapid wings
like clockwork it disappears, an
instant click of fingers snapping.

Frustration builds, simmers like stew
in a huge metal pot, the lid fits badly
lift-off - just a thunderclap away.

First appeared in Snakeskin, May 2003.

Cycling on Sundays over the Hei, Hilversum

Sunlight hazy, low-lying dust
mist over the fen, rolling land
covered in harsh grasses, heather
which flares purple in the spring
but in the height of summer
lies frazzled, a dull brown.

Trees through which sunlight
throws beams in our path
as we cycle along, alternating
between brightness and shadow
cones scattered all over the path
obstacles we try to avoid.

Our best chats, our longest too
conducted on a bench out in
the middle of this wildness
as we watch people, also on bikes
wind their way round the paths
most of them silent in their pursuit
making distance between themselves and home.

There is nowhere in this country
where you can avoid people but
this is as good as it gets, here
on our bench talking together
side by side putting the world
to rights once more, healing the
sometimes-wounds of misunderstanding.

First appeared in Brown County Writers Visions of Spring April 2004 (won their Poet of the Month Award).

Just another work day

Sprouting up and out of the moving
white carpet, the trees push
skywards, their roots hidden
in the swirl, while a golden orange ball
glows low on the horizon and there
is a stillness around here, despite
the traffic, despite the persistent smell
of manure mixed with petrol, industry meets nature
while the never-ending road
cuts a deep gash through everything
pushes her forward, destination
south in the morning, north in the
evening, traveling like all the
other commuters. Just another work day.

First appeared in Flashquake, March 2004.

Queen's Day, April 30th

2002

A cold, watery day
 Sky grey, trees and clothes
 Limp with moisture and still
 The crowd chants, an animal growl
 With one voice, for more.
 More what? That's the question
 A piece of magic, touch of royalty
 In their million, ordinary lives
 All clamoring for something.
 A sad state of affairs
 Amid a bleak excuse for a party
 A million, blood red faces
 Drunk on expectance, later on
 On rivers of Heineken. I can't feel
 More alien, more an outsider
 On such a day, national pride for monarchy
 Turning its collective face
 On poverty. The Royal House of Orange
 United under plastic see-through umbrellas
 Gloved hands waving to a throng
 Of squalling people, forgetting
 Their hunger, the incessant rain
 For this last Tuesday in April.
 A nation will wake up
 Tomorrow with a collective hangover
 And ask *was the excess worth it?*

2004

Orange hair, whole families sprayed.
 Did they sit in a row waiting their
 Turn? Make-up melting flags on
 Faces and a kind of hysteria, a mania.
 Koninginnedag 2004 growing hotter
 By the minute, reaching 22° by
 Three in the afternoon. Queues outside
 The ice-cream parlor in Laren
 Folk from miles around waiting to
 Sample the confection, *De Hoop*
 Famous in these parts. Orange
 Bitters and flowing beer

Loud and in-yer-face synthetic
Music in Hilversum, civilized jazz
In Laren. Money talks no matter
Where you go, it just uses different
Voices, says different things from
One town to the next,
You get less for your
Euros the richer the neighborhood,
The thicker the jackets on peoples' backs.

A week night in January

Night. Dark as Indian ink
noises of distant car
engines accelerating
going somewhere – away,
gone from here. Drone of
an overhead, low-flying
plane making its
descent into Schipol
carrying tourists or
natives back from
Christmas in the
Buitenland. Homing
pigeons flocking back
to jobs and their well-
furnished nests.

A man's whistle
drifts up, a happy
tune amidst the
silence. Everyone
else is huddled indoors
round flickering TV sets
or computer screens
throwing green light over
well-trodden carpet.

Too cold tonight, too
wet to walk the streets. Yet
the man outside keeps
right on whistling. Life
sure is good for him –
makes a change from
the sour faces you
encounter every day
here. Dissatisfaction rife.
No-one realizes just
how well off most of us
are here in Europe, while
it's so easy to forget the
homeless, complain
about nothing and everything.

The Weekly Meetings

There was a meeting of sorts next door today; the shoes, from children's pumps to old women's slippers, a crowd outside our doors. They came in their full-length robes, veils, purdahs I think they're called, covering everything from neck to toes. The bell rang for an hour, sporadically they gathered. This was Little Turkey putting its two fingers up at the West in their own quiet, behind-closed doors, everyday kind of way. Snubbing the country that fed them, clothed them, gave them the very flat this meeting was taking place in, the very floors they were spilling their crumbs on. This was their resistance, their way of holding on to the old country. Culture, traditions won't die here. They have also kept their language. It's more common, less shocking to the natives than English. We westerners have a lot to learn from them. I just hope we don't have to fear them, hope these weekly meetings are gossip-gatherings and that these women aren't hatching some plan. Perhaps revolution is in the air. Perhaps this is how racism begins – in fear, mistrust, not being included. In a breakdown of communication. We might all speak the native language of this, our adopted country, but how much do we really understand them? How much do we understand ourselves?

March 1st 2004

Chaffinches chirp as they sit
on the balcony's railings at
the back of the flat. Inside
the caged bird calls back.
It is almost as if they are
having a conversation.
Outside the children return,
boisterous from school, whooping voices
glorying in the realization that they
now have a few hours of
play ahead of them, that
the confined concentration
is over for another day.
Next door, the Turkish
neighbor vacuums her
fluffy carpet once more.
On the other side
someone is fitting
shelves, the drill hammers.
Laborers come home
from roof-laying, their navy
blue, advertisement-embossed
van screeches to a halt
just across the street. They
jump out in unison, eager
to hit the Heineken. Downstairs
the elderly neighbor
throws back her head and
laughs, her voice rising
a crescendo in her daily
chats with a friend. I
scribble, know my man
will return in an hour, tired
yet content, happy to be
working, have a job, yet also
glad to be home for the
night. A typical Monday on
Vingboonsstraat, the sky blue
this morning is now a heavy grey,
on this first day of March.

Our Language

I need to hear my language
In every mouth, turn on the
Radio and hear that old, sweet
Music. Homesickness eats like
A virus and overcomes me
Sometimes. Each day I hear
Your language lilting, breathe
It, absorb it through my
Very skin, wake up and go to
Sleep with it on my lips.
I even dream in Dutch.
Welterrusten, slaap lekker
And then the internal pictures come.
They are always green. The rain
That falls is Irish rain and I am
Home by your side once more.

First appeared in The Surface, February 2005.

Insistent Life

So much life everywhere you look. Insistent.
Bulb sprouting in a bag seeking earth, seeking
The brown crumbs that would rescue it. A
Valentine rose still blooming, perfect even
After a month in it's blue drinking glass, head
Nestling against the front window pane.
Budgie in a cage chirping for all she's worth, a
Regular alarm clock. Magpies outside, chaffinches
Blue tits, ravens, crows, all fighting over hanging
Peanuts or for space in the waving tree branches. You
Can almost hear the sap flowing under the
Bark while a fungal ring spreads
Round one of the tree's fat trunks. Inside
My husband sings and hums to himself,
A sign he's content, hooked in to his computer.
There is life everywhere and Spring is in the air.

Sound and Silence

There's a strange mixture tonight
silence broken only by the clicking
radiator, the wind-chimes on the
clothes line softly echoing, cars
motoring up and down the street, a
telephone ringing and ringing
in the bowels of this building. Won't
someone answer? Beneath my
feet the elderly woman is warming
her throat again – her loud laughter
rings through the night. Entertaining
again. Who said old age equals
loneliness? Not in her book it doesn't.
Upstairs the man drops something
with a thud on his new wooden floor,
our ceiling vibrates, makes me even more
aware that we're living in a box. Outside
the wind is brewing up. Its breath
deep and resonate makes it's own music.

First appeared in The Aurora Review, October 2004.

Bench Lady

She sits most of the day on the
bench, heart of the children's
playground with her stick and
badly-dyed hair. She wears

the same clothes every day,
flip-flops pink purple neon over
navy socks, leggings of some blue
shade topped with a man's grey jumper.

She watches all around her, looks
like she's waiting for someone
who never comes, tries to get
anyone to sit with her, pass

the time of day. All walk on,
suspicious of this woman who
looks for all the world like a
bag lady, or just let out for the day,

not a resident with a flat of her own.
Now she's looking in the bins. Rummaging
for food or buried treasure? Or just for
something to do? Time stretches

endlessly and still no-one comes.
Finally she gives up and
pulling herself up on the rubber-pointed
stick she begins her hobble

down the street, slowly – she
has all day. Time to kill before dark.
Time before she'll once more seek out
her bench, seek out some company.

First appeared in Underground Window, November-December, 2004.

Any Saturday Night on Vingboonsstraat

The pack is abroad tonight
you hear their wolf cries
reverberating, loud gutturals
even from their females
bound through the night
seeking something to damage.

They menace the old folk
no-one ventures out except
beer-can cradling brothers
their tattoos making their
bare arms shine darkness
under the streetlights.

The meeting place is always
the children's playground.
Teenagers doing what
come naturally, while at
the same time youth seems
older now than it once was.
Innocence shattered.
Needle-punctured.

I live and work underground

The light is practically non-existent
and still I write. Look up and
the sky presses its grey weight
over my head. Sitting at this desk
I could be underground, must look
up to see the branches, the red roofs
of houses, the weeping fungus-covered
tree trunks. Birds wheel free above me
their song so uplifting, anomalous
in this grey day. I watch as they
feed oblivious to the rain which
runs down the window muffling
their song and all other sounds.

Showdown

Cocooned. Marooned among the
textile. Quiet for once.
Sunlight cuts a band
across the coffee table.
Tennis on the TV. Bird
chirping, singing its stories.
Silence and bliss yet
at the same time I'm
waiting for the next
showdown. Another
misunderstanding, his
mother, as usual, the main *theme*.

A sheet of glass

Hard spiky leaves. Expectance of
yellow blooms heralding a
false Spring. Warm this side
of the window, on the other side
snow, a whipping storm. Just
a sheet of glass separates us from
chaos. Still in the grip of Winter
the view is ice, cold, darkness.

Driving Home

It was as if the North Sea was
Being lifted up and dumped
On us – a row of cars sitting
In line on the border of Gelderland
Headed in the direction of Utrecht.
Great sheets of water, visibility
Reduced to zero. Everyone stopped,
Waiting until the worst was over.
Hailstones came next as large as
Rats' eyes bouncing, rattling the tin can
I was sitting in. Alone with the
Radio, heater on full-boot in the hope
Of preventing the engine from overheating.
Praying, nervous, I ran a gamut of emotions
Until finally the living snake of cars started
Moving. Two hours later I stumbled
Up the stairs and into his arms. Home at last.

About the Author

Ruth Mark is a licensed psychologist, poet and editor. She's Irish but currently lives in The Netherlands where she teaches undergraduates about the workings of the brain. Her work has been published in diverse print and web venues including *Riviera Reporter*, *Dakota House Journal*, *Poems Niedergasse*, *Midnight Minds*, *Snakeskin*, *Wicked Alice*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, *Poetry Superhighway*, *Green Tricycle* and many more. She also reviews on a regular basis for Tamafhyr Mountain Poetry and The Blue Iris Review. More details can be found at: www.remark.be

