# VROUWKJE TUINMAN

'Lijfrente' (Annuities)

Cossee by, Amsterdam 2019

11 poems

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## **BUILDING WORKS**

A man is wheeled off and is looked at from inside.

What comes back is a box with a pair of glasses, a single sock, the other has vanished. 'We don't know where it ended up.'

A man lies in a bed that keeps him cool from underneath and on top displays everything: tubes, leads, a body in two parts, lights attached everywhere. His eyes gaze nowhere.

A man shakes sheets back and forth, tugs with his shoulders and legs. I only see it a moment, then he's put to sleep, and I see it all night long while he's still out.

There is a man who blinks to say he understands us, who puts on wide eyes for everything that surprises him, and that is everything.

For instance, that he can't speak. He pulls out the tubes that get in his way.

My husband complains about the jukebox that keeps him alive. That squeaks and puffs when he states that he's going home. To the railway station.

Doesn't matter which. All he needs to do is stand up.

There's a woman who phones that I must come now because the man is being held down. I count four nurses who squeeze his entire body and half heart into the bed. Two belts and two blue mitts.

'Hi sweetie!' My husband has no idea I was here before. That he's been here longer, what I'm talking about. He's hungry for things he doesn't really like. He daubs his face with custard, sips on cup-a-soup and toasts me

in pink lemonade, wants a second glass, is it true he saw me before? That he's been here longer. He's a man who's better off at home. He whispers, that he's lying next to someone who's dying.

This is not a place to stay in long. There's a man who is bothered by visitors, who laughs at visitors, who forgets he's had visitors an hour ago. Luckily, it's very jolly here with all these women. 'Will you marry me?'

There's a man lying here who zaps from Sky TV to Sky TV and then to Sky, because, he says, the other channels don't work. On the screen someone lands with his balls caught on a high bar. He laughs and grabs his scrotum,

the tube that traps his genitals, he tugs, the thing goes deeper than he thought.

A man pisses in the basin; an alarm goes off; the man is punished.

'Hi sweetie!' he shouts at me, I'm here too, this time we're here together.

There's a man lying there waiting for what's coming. He potters the whole week. Here he tore, there he shook, he learned to sit, drink, write, to remember that he's always forgetting. He's still missing that one sock.

# MODEL HOME

Everything is made ready for the husband's arrival.

The washbasin gleams; a vase of flowers on the table.

The pillows on the clean sheets are airy and puffed up — you could go and lie there and not be noticed. The husband sees none of these things; he wants a drink and a ciggy. He doesn't want tea, and no, no soup, no puddings, no TV.

He does want TV, because doesn't want to talk to us.

Two cats squeeze up against his feet, he bats them away, sniffs the air greedily, sucks in imaginary smoke spirals.

He thinks up reasons for us to leave;

we water the plants one more time.

## **JOKE**

Do you know the one about the man at the doctor's, he's lost a finger, asks: can I play the piano? I couldn't before. Something like that, climbing mountains, the slide trombone, driving a truck.

Do you know the one about the man who can't write any more,

can't climb the stairs and if he does manage it, can't go down again.

There always has to be someone near, because there's always something that has to be brought up, or down, something heavier than the kilo he's allowed to carry. There's always an empty fridge.

There are so many more nonsensical things than proper ones. You give them a finger and before you know it, they've taken the whole man.

There are also things that you must do – eating for instance, not drinking. No more being on your own. That's all changed.

Do you know the man who no longer knows if he wants anything?

## **BLEU DE CHANEL**

What is that stench, you asked, when you were not yet quite dead woke up and smelt what I had sprayed you with so you recognized yourself. That's CK Be, I said. It stinks, you said. Did I always stink like this? A new smell arrived, one for the independent man who answers only to himself, someone who lives his new life scoffing at prejudices. You used it a few times before you passed away, scoffing at prejudices. In the coffin I sprayed the old scent, the one with the idea of 'being yourself'. Original. And something about sharing. I even stank myself, so I thought, and seized the new blue bottle, that might make me woody and fresh. During the service I emanated perfection and self-assurance. The power of an aromatic accord suited me perfectly, maybe even better than it did you. I took it home with me. A second life. The next day I washed the clothes which were stained from now on. I said, to nobody in particular, but actually to you: you'd do better to buy a wedding dress for an occasion like this. You also only wear it once and at least you have a train. The ode to male freedom stood in the cupboard for a while until, perfect and pure, it dropped on the floor, etched away the tiles in a distinctive composition and flushed away in the joints.

## **BED SCENE**

The first time I found someone dead with his hands raised, it was a frog, flattened on the Lauwerecht and perfectly dried. The person I was walking with wouldn't let me bring him home. I've felt bad about it ever since and every time I drive along that street I look to see if the frog is there.

Twenty years later I saw him, somewhere quite different, just as flat, but now with one hand raised and the other on his heart.

The next time I found someone who was dead with his hands raised, it was you, leaning over backwards in bed, your arms and legs stretched out as though you'd hoped to get more air like that, the oxygen that aimlessly streamed around your emptied chest, that never reached your heart.

Someone held a bag open for me.

Now that I am the owner of your ring and a flattened frog,
I drive pointlessly round the streets.

# SELL-BY DATE: 20-06-2008

When you became ill you suddenly got a taste for all kinds of things.

When you died the house was full of broken-open packets you'd eagerly grazed in, three at once, till one won and could go with you to the sofa.

I sealed the others with Sellotape.

Now I had boxes full of things I never eat.

Melba toast from New Year's Eve, those thin biscuits, Japanese nuts, nougat, pre-baked rolls, soup you only need add water to.

Every week everything tasted a little more like everything else, till I checked the dates.

Now I still only have the honey, that's next to the pot of another dead.

If they can do it in pyramids, I can do it in my kitchen cupboard.

## BED SCENE 2

If I really want to know that you're gone
I return to your bed. I run the metres
between the front door and the foot of it and before
I come to a halt, I see whoever's lying there, it's not you.
He's here, I shout, pointing to the body
which looks, grimy and dull, at no one special
to the left, leans right for the viewer.
Next to you is your medicine. Your foot is cold and grey.

A good deal of the time you make an attempt at being present. Via other people, via myself: you're with us *ad nauseam*. The hard body on the mattress tells another story. You raise your arms so that everyone can see the gooseflesh on your belly. He's gone, I say to the man beside me, who opens his first-aid box. We don't know that, he says. I do.

## **OUTFLANKING MANOEUVRES**

I'm really beginning to become someone, aren't I, you said, we always said, when you had a small triumph. The phrase was your mother's and it implied that, no matter what successes came her son's way, the 'become' would probably never turn into 'be' let alone that that there'd ever be a past tense. Even though the doubt lingered, hence the 'aren't I'. Something could perhaps be achieved, even if that was more something for other people. And now it's come to this. You're dead and that does wonders for your CV, and even mine. Suddenly, without any qualifications, I'm a spokesperson and editor, more or less a Dutch celebrity. I'm linked to your work as 'literary executor'. On your behalf, I am smoking a cigarette with other successful people. I'm really beginning to become someone, aren't I.

## EMAIL TO THE AFTERLIFE

You've got good taste, a certain Shandee Ruan writes and laughs digitally. It's 22 March and now you've only one day left to pay.

Shandee mentions your password. It's easy, he says. He installed a programme and after that he could see what you were up to.

Guess what, he tells you. You downloaded a website to have a good time. You know what he means.

You had a good time, and that will now cost you 900 euros.

According to Shandee you have thirteen contacts.

Family members and colleagues, who if you ask for proof, or don't pay up, will get to see everything.

What does Shandee – his name promises love, a new start, attracts money – have over me? Why does he see you seated there, a year after your death,

and not me. Answer *Yes!*, he insists, and no, that is non-negotiable.

So where's the video? It's 25 March already.

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## **PRETENCES**

He really does his best.

He says 'see you soon', even though he knows that 'soon' means tomorrow, after a night in which anything can happen.

I've learned what can happen, no matter how often you say 'theresnothingthematter' to the ear on the other side, so it doesn't get upset, even if it is already upset.

# What doesn't count:

All the times the door swings open before my hand touches the bell.

The times he picks up the phone or more likely sends something himself, because phoning has become somewhat contaminated since the time somethingwasthematter.

## What does count:

The fact he has been coughing for some time.

The moment someone on the TV cheerfully mentions that gum disease always yes always leads to heart failure.

The first present I gave him was a jar of vitamin C tablets with zinc.

I can't look in his mouth just like that, can I?

After how many hours of silence is it permissible to leave home, get into the car, drive to his home to check if he's still breathing?

I've got a key but don't dare stick it in the lock, because who knows what I'll find. I phone him and pray I don't hear the phone ringing the other side of the door, that he picks it up and is in the supermarket.

'See you soon,' he says.

## **GRASS**

It is greener on the other side.

In one field are the people who have lost their will to. A garden further on those who still have years to go, but for their illness — no chance of changing places. One special spot is for those who have lived past their time and know it: the grass is cut there till it withers, only not on the lawn, where it grows back. Always on the same side, the one that's too green. I'm standing on the edge of something that's actually more moss than grass. My plot is full of old potholes and last year's leaves, but moles and worms dwell there too, toads are leaping, and in the evening dragonflies alight. I take a step.