

Place in Sequence

A conversation with Erik Lindner

Klaske Havik

For this conversation, poet Erik Lindner and I met in the forest. We decided to visit the very site of his collection *Hout* (Wood), the place from which sprouted the first lines of the series poem 'Het Ontwerp' (The Design):

Leaves where the road used to be
(...)
the brick cobble bedded in the ground

the straight wide-open road
which runs across the curving path.¹

Erik: This area is extraordinary. You can walk a whole day here and not come across any houses or roads. It's the largest nature reserve in the Netherlands. It's called the *Kroondomeinen* or Crown Estates. Some parts of this area are closed from 15 September to 25 December during rutting season. It's said that's when the king [Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands – ed.] hunts here. Even though it's a very old forest, it keeps changing. Since the time I lived here for a writer's residency, some of the paths have changed completely. I've seen new paths emerge and old paths I used to take get closed off.

Klaske: As a more urban poet, you've worked in The Hague, Berlin and Amsterdam. How did you end up here in the forest?

Erik: I'd been looking for a place for some time; it was hard to find anything in Amsterdam, and then I discovered a small ad for a writers' residency in this area. I thought it would be interesting, seeing what it would be like to work from a forest. It ended up being my opportunity to see what it was like to live outside the city. I also had a plan right away. Several poems I'd written before were linked to places by the sea (in North Holland). There's one series that ends with *de zee uit, uit de zee* (the sea out, out of the sea). With that phrase the thought was: 'now it stops, now I'm leaving the sea, [and] going into the woods' – as if it was planned that way ...

Klaske: As if the ending of that series was also a kind of prelude to this new environment: from the seaside to the forest. But in your earlier collections, you've also addressed the city ...

Erik: That's right. In my work, walking is important, but I think one can walk through nature as well as through a city – preferably a foreign city – and make notes that, if all goes well, become material for poems. This can be done in a place that's familiar, but in a strange city, you're more observant or receptive to unfamiliar details. Perhaps because something surprises you, you look more closely, more sharply, longer, because you've not seen it before. Ultimately, those cities can all be simultaneously present in the work; they run right through those series of poems.

Klaske: But when I read your urban poems about The Hague, the city you hail from, it strikes me that you describe details that an outsider, on the contrary, would not see. You evoke the rough margins of the city, ones you have to know to recognize a specific Hague atmosphere, say in the Schilderswijk or at the Haagse Markt.

Erik: That's true. There were places like Duindorp or the area around my home at the time, on the edge of the Schilderswijk. The walk from there to the market, past the swimming pool with the glass façade, that supermarket on the Hobbemastraat, the supermarket's entrance with a photocopy machine where the sliding doors kept opening. Those images are all in my second collection:

Here's a swimming pool. A glass wall.
A shopping street where the traffic won't fit.
...
At every move beside the photocopy machine
the supermarket's sliding door springs open.²

Klaske: What was your process when you created *Hout* (Wood) during your stay here? Did you simply walk in the forest each day and observe, or did you have some kind of plan, plotting certain routes in advance?

Erik: There was a bit of psychogeography in it, to paraphrase André Bréton...

Klaske: The psychographic walks of the Surrealists and International Situationists, with their *dérives*, were meant to spur a sense of wander, letting yourself be guided by the subconscious... But sometimes they took a very systematic approach to achieve this, for instance by navigating a city based on a map of another city, or by deliberately using an algorithm: for instance, always taking the first left and the second right, and so on, so that they ended up in unexpected places. Did you employ such constraints or are you just concerned with wandering in itself?

Erik: My father was an avid chess player. He said that even chess masters get stuck at some point. And then they somehow know ‘this move just feels better than the other one’. That’s how it works for me too. Some paths feel better than others. When I moved here, I’d stopped working at the Jan van Eyck Academy and editing *Terras* magazine, so I had time. I would often start the day by reading some pages of Proust or Woolf. Then I would go out walking the rest of the day. Sometimes I purposely walked at Dutch dinner time – six in the evening, when it is quiet here, very quiet. And sometimes I saw something and then I had to stop. Always to make a note.

Klaske: Do you always have a notebook with you?

Erik: Always. And I’m always looking. The first few months I told myself: I want to have at least *one line* on each walk. Even then, sometimes your first note is unusable . . . You just have to get your pen going.

Klaske: One line per walk is a modest ambition, isn’t it?

Erik: Yes, I don’t write that much. More is allowed, of course. I used to make the mistake of only writing down single words. These keywords usually made me remember the place where it was written. But at some point, I realized words on their own are not that useful. It always has to be a line. Half a line of poetry at the very least. There must be a bit of a temperament in it . . . When I imposed that on myself, it made my impression a little greater than just a word.

Klaske: So, suppose you take walks here every day; you write a line every day. Then when you’re here for a fortnight and you’ve taken fourteen walks: does that result in a poem, a composition of all those different impressions and lines?

Erik: No. That would be ideal, because then it all stays together in a homogeneous way. But I work much more messily than that. Those notes do come together at some point. If I have a lot of them, I put them in sequence in a document. And then I have one or two pages of lines that I want to use. Then I elaborate on some notions. I print these pages and then, on my next walk, I take that printout with me, next to my notebook. And at some point, when it’s really enough – but then I’m already walking away from this forest – I’ll sit in a café in Amsterdam and write every morning.

Klaske: You have a regular writing spot?

Erik: Café Park, in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam. That’s where I work, using a big notebook: I group all these loose lines and impressions on different pages. And if I do that for a month, six days a week, for an hour each time, constantly rewriting, at some point the

poem and eventually a series of poems emerge. But before that, I need to gather sufficient material.

Klaske: When you're doing a residency like this, do you make a plan beforehand to get the most out of the time?

Erik: Sometimes residencies are more like explorations – for instance, in the case of short ones of only two weeks, when you don't need to have your own project for it right away. At a certain point, I started taking a more planned approach. Once I was offered a residency in a beautiful apartment on the boulevard in Oostende on the Belgian seaside; it even looked out over the sea. And then I thought: I've always wanted to write one long sea poem, in which the movement of the sea actually determines the poem. In the poem I wrote during that residency, I used two-line stanzas only. The first is a wave coming towards you, the second another wave rolling back. To find it, I walked up that jetty in Oostende every evening and wrote one or several lines. And so that was a conceptual, or rather, a *preconceived* poem. And there I also only had fourteen days, eleven of which I used to write, I think.

Klaske: And for your residency here in the forest?

Erik: Here I was also working on my second novel, which is partly set in San Sebastián in Northern Spain, so that had nothing to do with this place. But at the same time, I did take those many walks here in the Crown Estates, which provided lines for my poems. And that series of eleven poems that concludes the *Hout* collection is the product of those first eight months here.

Klaske: That's rather distilled.

Erik: Yes, quite distilled. And that's also why it's often difficult to trace it back precisely for the readers, who – if all goes well – also add their own images and memories to the image, which in the end makes it very difficult to figure out exactly where the poem is located: it becomes a montage of the places I evoke and the ones readers associate with them. As a result, my descriptions remain abstract, to some extent, in the sense that I don't specify different types of trees, for example. Well, I did mention a birch, once.

Klaske: Indeed, you don't give much information on the different species of plants. It's diverse here, though. Just now we're mostly walking among pine trees and very slender birches. The ground has a very green covering of moss and blueberry shrubs. Other sections we passed were much higher, had more beech trees and less vegetation on the ground. We're now crossing an overgrown path.

Erik: We cross straight ahead here; this is an old man-made path. You know, when I walk, I'm not searching for anything in particular, unlike the people who hike here to see the deer or the boars. That's nice too. But if you're looking for that, you're not looking for an impression for a poem. For me, it's about opening yourself up to something that's not necessarily there.

Klaske: You said what you want is to capture a kind of atmosphere or mood of a place, right? Your perception?

Erik: Sometimes when I visit a place for the first time, I don't quite capture that site-specific atmosphere or mood right away. I have to visit it a few more times to figure out why I'm there – or why something is happening to me, right there, why an emotion is evoked by that place.

About the word perception: of course . . . we walk through a forest and we perceive things. But actually, the reader is not that concerned with my personal perception. In my poems, I try to evoke photographic images. These do emerge from my perception, my close observation, but from these, I construct images in the poems that don't have to match exactly what I saw.

Klaske: Remarkably, in your poems you never literally say 'I see' or 'I hear' or something like 'the sun on my skin'. You actually keep yourself out of your poems: you just describe the trees, the path, the objects and situations. So you leave yourself, the 'I', out, allowing readers to insert their own perceptions . . . without you as the intermediary, as it were.

Erik: I think that touches on the essence of what I mean very well. It's not that I want to eliminate myself completely. Because I think that in every smallest choice, of an article, of a word for something, there is already something subjective. Language is never completely neutral.

Klaske: But you don't impose it or explain it. Perhaps we can put it this way: your images come from specific places that evoke some kind of emotion in you, which then appears in the text in a kind of distilled form.

Erik: If that works, if that emotion ends up in a text, let's call it lyricism. That's what makes poetry lyrical. There's obviously something underneath it. It's not just a forest. There's also something in that forest that manages to trigger something. And then you're talking about a human experience, of course, even if I'm not literally describing it.

Look, here it comes again. Do you see it?

Klaske: Yes, the sun. Only in winter when the trees are still bare is the ground so beautifully illuminated.

Erik: Yes, and then the ground immediately looks greener. But I don't describe how I see the bark of that tree there and the ground beneath it. I don't describe how I see them. They have to exist in the poem by themselves, so to speak.

Klaske: They *are* present in your poems, without introduction or explanation. I see you use very few full sentences, with a verb and a subject and an object. There are instead many nouns, sometimes almost lists of objects or spaces.

Erik: Yes, and I also try to be sparse with adjectives. You see, eventually those words together produce the images in a poem. And evoking an image in a poem is, I think, different from describing my perceptions. The point is that those images, together, produce a kind of film. The moment that film works for you, you've moved beyond that enumeration, that list, as you put it; it turns into a more complex image.

Klaske: Just ahead, a herd of deer is crossing through the trees into an open field. There must be thirty of them!

Erik: You see a lot of deer here. You're really in the middle of nature. But then, suddenly, on a path, you find a paving stone set in the soil, in the midst of all these vast acres of the Crown Estates. If a paving stone is set in the soil, there must have been a stone road here. And that, for me, is where I find the sensitivity, in that stone. Something left behind from an earlier time. It makes you realize that before, this was not just a nature reserve. And that also means that there was a design.

Klaske: In that series we keep returning to, 'Het Ontwerp' (The Design), you also jump from image to image, and for me as a reader these jumps are not always logical. Sometimes they are even disorientating. You start with the path we're walking towards now. And then you enter a sort of old-fashioned, painting-like image, with a spinning wheel and a single bed and a cluttered open-top desk, in the second poem. And the sequence keeps jumping from one situation to another.

And as a reader, you're pulled away from that path and those trees the poem started with. I wonder how this all comes together, and why this is titled 'The Design'. What is designed? Does the poem describe a design, or rather, is the montage of those images itself the design?

Erik: I can give you several answers. The design is indeed the configuration of those five poems. The first poem is in fact really about

a design. You'll see that in a moment, when we get to the place. But if you go beyond the spinning wheel and the single bed and the cluttered open-top desk – from a film by Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre* (*The Room*)³ – then, in poem three, you arrive at a fragment from Athens about fish being cleaned on mat. So, Athens appears in the same series. I often go to Athens – a friend of mine lives there. Then, in poem four, you arrive at a painted window. And then a person comes into view, a curved jawline, an outstretched arm, and the fifth and last poem ends at a house:

Hier schijnt de zon van onder de vloerdelen.
Hier staat jouw huis in een tuin van puin.

here the sun shines from under the floorboards
here your house stands in a yard of shards.⁴

Klaske: I've read the series several times, as it appeals to me from the perspective of architecture as well: how do I read 'design' into this, and how do all these very different situations come together? Why is that fish being cleaned on a mat? What does that have to do with that avenue of trees or that garden of rubble in the fifth poem? How does that come together?

Erik: Very simply put, they're notes from one and the same period. To me, they must have some connection. At the same time, there's some space between them because they're not on the same page. They also stand by themselves, each in their own poem.

Design is also what precedes the writing, what you do not yet know precisely, but which emerges during the process: the form that the poem will eventually have. Free verse is an open form, unlike an alexandrine or a sonnet, and yet, even in these free verses, every poem has a fixed structure. The process of writing entails a search for that design, and I know the final form only once I feel the poem is finished, when I know I've created that form. You could also call that a design.

Klaske: So then every series poem could also be called a design. You collect lines – that's what you work with; that's what you design with.

Erik: Yes, I start with half or whole lines that I collect, and they cluster into stanzas. A blank line between those stanzas can be another major displacement already.

Look, a boar. It's a boar, right?

Klaske: Yep. He's pretty big, light in colour, well camouflaged in the high yellowed grass.

So, it's about constructing a certain series of images, that you evoke with all those different entrances, maybe? Like that bag of medlars and that white tub chair in the first poem, where did they come from? You won't easily find a bag of medlars on a road, right?

Erik: I conjure a cheap plastic tub chair in the grass, whose legs bend easily. And that bag of medlars fits with that. That's an image. But why do they match? In the image I want to form, it's right because the poem needs it. And that's why I always rail a bit against the notion of perception. Sometimes I feel like a small child in that too. Of course I perceive things. But no, it's ultimately what the poem wants. Yes, that poem needed that image.

Klaske: Is it because only the description of the avenue and the trees and the field needed contrast? Something that has to happen, adding a kind of ugliness in the space?

Erik: There's not much chance of such a chair here, in a nature reserve. Therefore, that image provides a kind of suspense.

Klaske: I noticed your poems sometimes linger after a line: you set something up and then you leave it open for a moment. And then you switch to another situation – which leaves me, as a reader, with a question mark.

Erik: You could say I make images, but to complete those images I need the reader. It's precisely because it might not be possible – to create the image with language (unlike with photography or a drawing, but I choose language anyway) – that I do it, and I also want to see the handwritten way I wrote it down, on the spot.

Klaske: So when you write at the table in the café, you're actually editing what you jotted down *in situ*. You extract lines, moments, ingredients, straight from the site, which you then bring together in a follow-up process.

Erik: In essence, you're right: in that place, the poem arises from notes. But that's the place captured in words. But in all those scribbles, I cannot yet see the form of the poem in them at all. Only when I'm sitting at that café table will it start to look like a poem. And any reader of my work will start to discover a structure of the poem.

Klaske: Look! Fresh deer tracks on the path.

Erik: Might be those thirty we just saw running. It does build quite the suspense of the place. The way to reach the place is always longer than I think. We did make a bit of a detour. We're not actually allowed in this area.

We're almost there.

Klaske: Ah, there was a drive here. From a country estate maybe.

Erik: You see. This is the design. You see it. I think it was a road

Klaske: Yes, you'd think it belonged to a country estate. It's clearly been planted, in the past: those rows of beeches. You almost expect a fence or a stone here. And it's probably planted for aesthetic reasons, an avenue of beeches: for grandeur, marking the entrance to something, a farm, a manor house? The light at the end of the path that makes the place mysterious. A jump in time, to imagine that something was here. You realize that centuries ago, a carriage drove here, or someone on a horse. And then it stops, after this beech grove.

Erik: Yes, although the path does continue; actually it merges into a larger path. And that ends in a field. But you saw it right away, before we got here, you said: this is a drive. Strange though, this is in the middle of nature, because we've been walking through the forest for more than an hour now, and now suddenly we're standing in a place that was built, made, inhabited.

Leaves where the road used to be
the avenue of trees halfway across the field

birds in the swaying treetops

a white bucket chair in the grass
a bagful of ripe medlars

the tussocks of heather
the brick cobble bedded in the ground

the straight wide-open road
which runs across the curving path.⁵

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Interview translation Klaske Havik,
Poems translation Francis R. Jones

- 1 From the poem 'Het ontwerp' (The Design) in *Hout* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2024), Page 25, transl. Francis R. Jones.
- 2 From the poem 'Tijdelijke Halte' (Temporary Stop) in *Tongen Trede* (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij, 2000), 21, transl. Francis R. Jones.
- 3 Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre*: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7pybf8>.
- 4 From the poem 'Het ontwerp' (The Design) in *Hout* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2024), Page 28, transl. Francis R. Jones.
- 5 From the poem 'Het ontwerp' (The Design) in *Hout* (Amsterdam: Van Oorschot, 2024), Page 25, transl. Francis R. Jones.