



Photo: Steve Chettle

Esther Jansma

Esther Jansma, who is an archaeologist as well as a poet, made her debut in 1988 with *Stem onder mijn bed* (*Voice under my Bed*), followed by *Bloem, steen* (*Flower, Stone*, 1990) and her much-acclaimed third collection, *Waaigat* (1993). Her fourth book, *Picknick op de wenteltrap* (*Picnic on the Spiral Staircase*, 1997), is written from the perspective of a small child. *Hier is de tijd* (*Time Is Here*, 1998) was awarded the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize in 1999, and *Dakruiters* (*Spires*, 2000) won the Hugues C. Pernath Prize in 2001. Her most recent collection is *Alles is nieuw* (*Everything is New*, 2005). In 2006 she received the A. Roland Holst Award for her complete oeuvre. A selection of her work in English translation by Francis R. Jones will appear from Bloodaxe in 2007.

Translations on pages 50, 51 and 52 by Francis R Jones

The House

*Even after the Romans people pass.
Someone (imagined) in Carlisle, 2004:*

The sounds belong to my ears, the doors
belong to my hands, the red tiles
to my eyes, the floors to my daughters and
the attics to my sons and vice versa

it all belongs to me, I live as I sleep
beneath the safe roof of my breathing
until the wind shakes up the walls,
forgets the tiles with my sight and falls still.

It will be another wind blowing through the house.
Maybe you are still here, and maybe not.
It will be another wind blowing through the house.

Someone has a house, the sounds belong
to her ears, the doors belong to her hands,
but it is not me. We are not there.

The Beginning

Roman glass, Housesteads

Suddenly she saw the size of the world.
Nothing was the way she had expected
things were fuller than she had thought

and more colourful, by looking through
the glass that had found her she saw
the inside of shells; what moved through it

was form and utterly itself and all
the while a rainbow of possibilities
blown into life and lost and found again

after the ages had painted their mother-
of-pearl across it, ever so fragile
and there it lay, just like that in her hand.

128 AD

I come from the mud, with cohorts
up to my eyes in sublunary shite
I've razed forests, repaved and rerouted roads,
rebuilt the Imperial Border. The places I've seen,

pal, soft as porridge the soil there: you drown
in sludge, you dine on swill, your billet's a one-
arsed village of mud slapped into bricks and dried...
Not that the bloody sun ever shines there –

it's turned its miserable face away
hides in a slate-grey crying fit of mist
more rain, vicious, pissing, remorseless
than you could ever believe – but

the crack was good as well. Plenty of blondes,
Batavian whores. Who bleat or is it moo
as you're screwing them. As for their grasping
hard-and-fast fingers, fair enough - I had the cash.

And then the crossing, worked on the wall
hand of a god who keeps us safe and warm.
The job is done. I stayed on: I live in clover
here in the glow of this stone hand's palm

that reddens as I write. Sunset
casts on these grasslands what look like
old hills, the clouds above are new,
the shades of night close in. I wait.

Wall

On the 'right' side of whatever wall

It is the way we say it is, simply
here and us, here in our wide-open house
built of landscape, grass we understand
and graze, water, roads, fields of grain.

Crystal-clear places filled with stars and gods
are our roof and here all actions speak for
themselves – and so they must, there's no room
here for what has remained untamed, unknown.

And yet beyond the meandering border of this
thinking, the mortared project labelled we, the enemy's
always waiting and I don't know him, he won't fit

inside this head, this order, the nowadays in which
I live as if in a night that's filled with danger and din
and close the windows which keep on blowing open.

The Collector

Excavations under way at Hadrian's Wall

This was not found in some attic but down
at rock bottom like things left behind after
a modern death, limp neglected tat
in the hands of the heir, myself, collector.

What drives me into the depths is not a desire for
something higher, it's little and insolent, picking up
clothes the dustman left behind – turned to uneven
paving, rain-stained – to know what it was like.

It's scrabbling, chasing the vanishing,
people of the past, shards of thought,
sequences which led to action - planing wood,

cutting out little clothes – moments long ago,
which really were and which are really
vanished till someone grasps them, reads them back.

