

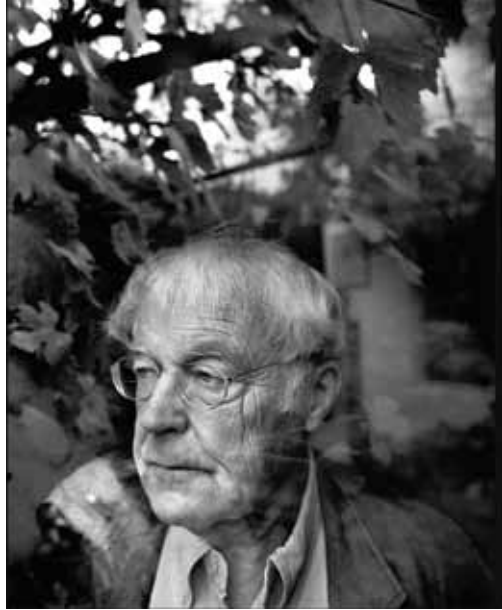
Green Pastures

Rutger Kopland (1934-2012)

The wave of secularisation that swept across Western Europe from the 1960s onwards had a liberating effect on many intellectuals. In the Northern Netherlands certainly, where Protestant churches had had a firm grip on the spiritual life of large groups of Christians, demythologisation was seen as a triumph. But God's departure left a formidable vacuum, since from now on one was left to one's own devices. If there is one Dutch poet whose work testifies to that laborious process, it is Rutger Kopland, the pseudonym of the psychiatrist and neuroscientist Rudi van den Hoofdakker (1934-2012). His first collection, *Onder het vee* (Among the Cattle), from 1966, opens with a psalm that in the meantime has become a classic, whose first stanza reads as follows:

*The green pastures the still waters
on the wallpaper in my room -
as a frightened child I believed
in wallpaper*
(transl. James Brockway)

Kopland's early work has often been called ironic and melancholy, but what also strikes one on rereading it is a bitterness that issues from disappointment. The series *G* (1978) attempts in nine failed sonnets to confront and understand the painful absence of God. I wrote, says Kopland, a poem about G's face, about how 'it was so absent, I likened it / to water in which I could see the face / of a horse,' but when I looked up 'the far bank was deserted'. A typical feature of Kopland's poetry is the distance he creates by not so much presenting the simile itself, but rather the process of searching for a suitable image for what at the same time is and is not there. It is also Kopland's calm, reflective, conversational tone, without any striking rhythmical or musical effects, which creates the impression that the speaker has a somewhat detached view of the



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drama. He tries to cut big things down to size to make them manageable.

As he grew older, partly perhaps because he had a demanding job as a university professor that left him little time to explore his poetic world exhaustively, his poems became cooler, and more conceptual. The world had to speak for itself. That is not always successful, but it is in the series *Dankzij de dingen* (Thanks to the Things, 1989):

*The morning when things reawaken,
low light appears from the
mahogany, table silver and china,

the bread smells of bread again,
the flowered teapot of tea*

Things reawaken and come to life, which has the irrevocable implication that they will at some point die again: 'The night in which things again become shadows / of themselves.'

Death is undoubtedly the principal theme of all poetry, and Kopland's work is no exception. If initially transience is still seen as a loss that saddens us, the poet gradually develops a mild kind of lucidity, which realises, indeed with a certain amused bewilderment, his total futility. True, the landscape of Northern Drenthe, where he lives, reminds him of the paradise that was held out