



Peter Swanborn
Six poems
Translated from the Dutch by
Thea Summerfield

Peter Swanborn's poetry debut, *Bij het zien van zijn lichaam* (At the sight of his body), was published in 2007. One year later the book was nominated for the C. Buddingh' Prize for the best poetry debut of the year. January 2009 *Een koud bad* (A cold bath) was published. This book of twenty-four songs about people who drowned, was nominated for the PZC Public Award. In the autumn of 2009 Podium Publishers published *Tot ook ik verwaai* (Until I too drift away), a poetry memoir about a mother with Alzheimers. This book was nominated for the J.C. Bloempoezieprijs.

Poems and articles by Peter Swanborn have been published in many newspapers and magazines in Europe and the USA. He is an editor of the literature and arts magazine *Tortuca*, published in Rotterdam, and works as a literary critic for the leading Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant*. Before 1997 he made a living as an artist and photographer. Translations of his poetry are available in several languages.

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Name

I see how she ignores me, carefully
stealthily eyes me, wonders
what or why this man in her house.

And yet she does not ask who I am, why
I open wardrobes, air coats, unasked
sort the post, tidy, make tea.

Am I a doctor, a handyman, a son
perhaps? She addresses me formally,
one never knows, and smiles politely.

I play along, your tea madam,
startled when she asks who, in that photograph,
it is, that woman holding a child in her arms.

Plunder

I walk through my house, sit still, look around.
See how chairs, cupboards, table like children
abandoned try to find a place in a home
that is strange, but aims to offer continuity.

And think of the months when her things
stared at us in fear. Which would go with whom,
and why not together? None of us listened,
busy with lists and fair shares, lofty valuations.

We threw out, took home, each our share and
failed to see that nature had stolen a march on us.
For there, at the edge of town, a woman sat,

her mind a plundered house. In the corner
a few last memories, carelessly forgotten.
No one picks them up, returns them to their cupboard.

Pain

You see sir, she says, I don't remember anything.

That may be so, I say. Your hands tremble,
your lips are dry. Come, eat a little.
It is salty and soft and you think it is

delicious, that's what you just said, delicious.
She looks at me so blue and empty
that I wonder how it is possible,

to forget everything, everything, just the pain.

Like a parasite it burrows, races
grinning along the skull, consumes
like burning acid, upsets with a crash and

when I attempt to divert, one little mouthful,
please, it is still warm, I'll help,
she whispers, as for the first time,

you see sir, I don't remember anything.

Ceiling

What is she looking at? A fly
or just shimmer and shadow,
vague lines on a drab wall?

Or am I wrong and instead of seeing
she is seen, from the ceiling, risen
by means of her spirit, ready to go.

Or is it different again, do they see each other,
speak and laugh soundlessly, play
I spy. But it is my eye that does not see.

Prayer

Watch her face and wish for nothing better
than seeing what refuses to be seen,
hearing what I cannot hear.

Take her hand and beg: come
back, open up, answer me,
fool me, pretend.

But who is silent does not give in.
She lifts her arm, opens an eye.
It is all there. I cannot reach it.

Thread

A thread of glass hangs above
the bed. It shivers and shimmers,
wafts along pillows, sheets, across
skin naked and translucent, shields,
invites, but is in no hurry.

Will it dissolve, later, behind her back,
a ladder pulled up after the last one
saved? Or will it fall, shroud
the body that remains, small and cold,
in swathes of unbreakable light.