

# I, Migrant?

Amelia Walker, University of South Australia

## 1. *Vreemdelingen* (Strangers) / We are Them

Who are we?

Where do we come from?

And why?

Late morning, Den Haag.

The wind sighs, makes listless swipes  
at its hand-me-down toys.

First, a crushed tin can, rattling  
round the icy feet of a grey stone statue. Then, scraps  
of catalogues, a newspaper article  
that somebody clipped out—purposefully,  
carefully—its trimmed edges say that much—  
its rain-blurred print offers no suggestion why ...

Finally, the mousey brown hair of a woman  
who watches her feet as she walks,  
one foot, then the other, then ...

beneath her arm, a yoga matt,  
clutched like a sucked  
and fraying blanket.

At the nearby library, a man hunches  
his way into a book, knuckles white,  
in fists he doesn't realize he has made.

Ten, sometimes fifteen minutes pass  
between ...

... each ...

... turn ...

... of ...

... page ...

The book says ages eight and up.

Meanwhile it's happy hour at O'Shamrockigans

—not that time means much

in a place where it is always Guinness O'Clock

and speaking of Guinness,

My Goodness!

Jimmo's already falling down.

'The name's not Jimmo,' he blabbers, 'It's ...' Streets away,

a young woman slips from shop

to shop, looking at everything,

buying nothing.

When assistants approach, she smiles,

shakes her head, scurries

through the cold streets

into the next store. Three floors up,

within four walls, someone

shoves a vacuum cleaner, droning

and grumbling

over forty square metres

of floorboards that will never be clean. And

at the same time, down on the square, a man  
finishes his black coffee, stubs his cigarette,  
checks his watch, exhales  
a wobbly grey oblong, then orders  
another black coffee,  
rolls another fag.

Maybe he fell in love with a Dutch girl,  
maybe she is married to a diplomat,  
maybe in their past lives they ran businesses,  
held degrees, worked fifty hour weeks. Maybe  
they have applied for jobs here  
as cleaners, or in cafes. Maybe,  
just maybe,  
they'll be lucky enough  
to even get those jobs ...

Or maybe it was work that brought them here.  
Perhaps he's with Shell. Perhaps she is the diplomat.  
Perhaps it's not money, but friends  
they long to make ...

I am all of these people.  
I am none of these people.  
None of these people are me,  
though I have done the things they did,  
been seen as they were seen  
(un  
seen).

I am one of the them  
or one of the us  
depending where you stand.

I am ...

**2. Hello! Pleased Your Meeting To Make!**

I am three weeks in this country.

I look work. I have degree.

What degree have I?

C ... C ... Com ...

... myooo ... neck—nock—nick—ja, nick ...

Com myoo nick ...

... ca—ayte—eee – uh—uh—uhn!

Com myoo nick cayte eee uhn.

Honours class first.

I writing teacher.

I learn children to use words good.

Sometimes I learn teachers to learn children to use words good.

And I books.

I mean I do books.

My own books. I have five books.

I mean. I don't mean.

I not just have five books.

I have five books wrote.

I mean wroten.

I mean, know you what I mean?

I mean, I writer ... Well ...

No. I still no can read no can write. But ...

I can lots jobs do.

I want any job do.

\*Ring Ring\*

\*Ring Ring\*

Hello. Pleased your meeting to make.

I call about poster job.

For toilet lady.

I want apply but I have one asking.

Does 'literacy essential' mean I need to be literacy

or that literacy important not?

Hello?

Hello?

### **3. Out of the Sky**

You fall out of the sky and into the twilight  
zone of time zones. Zoned out, you go  
about the business of getting down to busy-ness  
except that everything here is none of yours.  
Thus household chores become a matter of life—or  
at least that's what you're calling it.

You make the kitchen spotless.

You make the bathroom spotless.

You make the bedroom, the lounge room spotless.

Then you bake a cake,  
take a shower,  
jump on the bed,  
steal the neighborhood's hairiest cat  
and rub it all over your sofa.

You leave the house when  
it's necessary to stock  
up on food and  
supplies for  
cleaning.

You walk  
the same  
few streets  
to the  
same few  
stores where  
you know

your same  
few words  
will get  
you by,  
get you  
out and  
back, quick  
as you  
can via  
the  
exact  
same  
route.

You thought travel would broaden your experiences.  
Instead you find yourself tugging  
at the edges of each day like a Victorian woman  
at the strings of her corset  
—tighter—tighter ...  
as if making something smaller  
could actually make it lighter ...

#### **4. Woorden en Worden (Words and Becoming)**

The Dutch word *horen* means both ‘to hear’  
and ‘to belong.’  
To *inschrijven* is literally ‘to write yourself in,’  
which you do when you register with your council  
or take a membership with a gym, club or library.  
The Dutch word for ‘to be’  
and / or ‘become’  
is *worden*.  
*Ik word*  
*jij wordt*

*Wij worden.*

Outside of words, what  
where when why how in this world  
can we be and come?

Dutch is not essential in Den Haag.

There is always someone around who speaks English,  
at least, some version of it.

A nine-to-five English,  
a high-school-text-book English,  
a drilled-in, practical necessity  
good for you like Brussels sprouts and algebra English  
an English that, to me  
is not English  
not *my* English.

*‘Ik wil graag een koffie, alstublieft,’* I ask a waitress.

‘Large, small or medium?’ she replies.

‘Uh ... small please ...’

I don’t have the words

in any language

to explain,

I’d rather speak Dutch like a fool

than English like an Outsider,

would rather trip and stumble over my broken sentences

than scale these sheer soapstone exchanges

—a slippery wall, no cracks for handholds,

no way over, under or through,

no glimpse what lies beyond.

## 5. Denial

I am not going to be *one of those ‘Engelse mensen.’*

Nuh uh. No way.

I didn't come half way  
around the world to go anything less than the whole way  
with this culture. I am gonna eat  
what the locals eat and speak  
what the locals speak, or at least  
kill myself trying—which might not be too difficult  
given the Dutch penchant for deep fry.

Oh sure. I've heard there are parties  
where everybody speaks English as their first language,  
dreams, thinks and feels in it, understands  
what you mean, not just the words you say ...  
Bah! Who needs parties?  
Who needs friends? And understanding?  
Who needs their hairdresser to know  
that a couple of centimeters means off—not total?  
And their dentist ...?

The white ghetto of Den Haag!  
Don't need it. Nuh uh. Not me. No way.  
Not even every now and then  
just to make it through—No.

Not  
even  
one  
tiny  
little  
nagging  
little  
eency  
weency  
little  
bit ...



## 6. Okay

Okay. So I'm paler than a dead albino axolotl under ten feet of snow.

It don't matter.

So I just signed a job contract that I could read eight words of.

It don't matter.

I've been sick three times in one month

and the only TV I understand is *Teletubbies* ... Okay,

so maybe 'understand' is a slight exaggeration ...

It

Don't

Matter

Because

## I LOVE RUGBY

and soccer and hockey and cricket and tennis balls zooming

back and forth and back and

pretty much any excuse

to surf the screaming sea

of corner pub pulse rates,

the whole bar filled with best mates,

glowing faces—names I can't place

right now—but anyhow

that's not what counts,

not what it's all about.

I'm just here to YELL STUFF OUT

An Irish pub

packed with English

and Welsh and Scottish and Americans and Kiwis and yeah

even a couple of Irish,

my fella and I the token Aussies.

That's right! Right now I am  
for the first time in my life  
without doubt  
Au-stray-lee-ahn.  
In the blur of my fourth drink  
it's crystal clear:  
you're never really *from* a country  
'til you leave it.  
I mean, what would be the point  
of an Irish pub in Ireland?

A guy in a full kilt  
—sporrán and all—  
leaps on a table,  
gives a bonny battle greeting.  
The chick from California just, like,  
so totally can't believe it.  
Meanwhile the walls are a Molly-Blooming  
with shamrocks, pots of gold, and  
Danny Boy, the pipes, the pipes ...

We're the same  
in that we're not the same,  
together in that tomorrow we'll all  
wake up  
alone  
out of pocket, just like place  
wondering  
how the hell did I get here?

But laughter is a place tomorrow can't touch.  
Here and now, who you are  
is a matter of when you scream  
and when you boo.  
The biggest question:

*What are you drinking?*

The only answer:

Guinness.

## **7. That guy slash woman slash couple**

I am constantly hearing stories  
about the guy slash woman slash couple  
who has slash have lived in Den Haag  
for twenty years slash more.  
and he slash she does  
slash they do not  
know  
one  
single  
word  
of  
Dutch.

Everybody knows at least one of these men  
slash women slash couples.  
It's only a matter of time before I too get to meet  
him slash her slash them ...  
and boy, am I looking forward to that.

I have so many questions—like—

How the heck did you walk past the street signs  
every day for 20 years and not figure out what they meant?  
Did you wear a fricken' blindfold?

And how did you resist temptation  
to such extent that you never ever even spoke  
of trying *Oliebollen*, *Stroopwafels*, *Hagelslag* or *Speculoos*?

And in English, even, have you never concluded that your car  
 slash bike slash television  
 was finally *KAPOT?*

Months pass. I never manage to meet this man  
 slash woman slash couple.  
 Until one day, walking into a store and speaking English straight up  
 because what's the point even trying, I glance  
 to my left and there they are  
 the whole lot of 'em, dancing  
 in the glossy glass shop front  
 like the sixth freakin' sense—I  
 am that man slash woman slash couple.

*Ik! Ja! Ik!*

*Ik kan*

*helemaal*

*geen*

*Nederlands*

*spreken.*

*Wat vreselijk!*

*Wat stom!*

## **8. Salvation Now Comes in a Tube**

Nobody liked it, the first time  
 —though we'll swear thick  
 brown salty that we did, that it's in our blood  
 a daily ritual, the very essence of who,  
 of what we are.

In truth we were forced to swallow it over  
 and over, told like Orwell's Epsilons  
 that we loved it. Of course  
 we loved it. Loving it was—*is*—our birthright.

And if we don't? Well,  
then there's obviously  
something  
very,  
very  
wrong.

A la clockwork orange, we were pinned  
to couches in suburbia, shown 1950s technicolour  
red cheeks on black and white glowing  
bright as bright can be, that jingle  
like a tropical fly that lays its eggs inside your ear  
and over six months they devour  
all the porridge in your skull  
'til you finally exclaim YES

I LOVE VEGEMITE!  
GIVE ME MORE ...

When homesickness hits, every Aussie has a plan.  
Step one: get Vegemite.  
Step two: huddle in bedroom with said Vegemite. Open lid ...

... and ...

... sometimes you don't even have to eat any.

The stuff's not cheap here, after all.

When two Aussies meet, it's 'Oh ...  
So ... you're from Australia too? Well ... mate ...  
you ain't getting any of MY Vegemite.'

But when we meet anybody who is *not* from Australia, it's  
'Come on come on try my Vegemite  
I dare you double dare you, be your best friend,

honest, cross my fingers, hope to die, just a tiny spoonful ...’

Tempting as it may seem at that point,  
the one thing you must never ever *ever* do to an Aussie  
is to tell them, Vegemite is really nothing more  
than a rip off of Marmite  
born some ninety-odd years back  
when a group of colonists sat round a table and said,  
‘Well well good show old chap, we’ve got this country quite near sorted.  
Let’s see ... we’ve got four beaches named Brighton,  
seven streets named after Queen Victoria ...  
We have pigeons  
and we have rabbits—very important that one.  
What don’t we have?  
Oh of course.  
A salty brown yeast extract that’s filled with vitamin B and gives us something to do  
with the by-products of beer manufacturing—and because it’s filled with vitamin B and  
salt it’s also rather good to eat by the spoonful when dealing with the morning after  
effects of said beer ...’

... because *that* is a filthy mean horrible cruel untrue made-up LIE!

## 9. It Figures

I never topped my class in maths.  
Even if I had, it’s safe to say I’d struggle  
to calculate the shape, weight, dimensions  
of who I am.  
It’s safe to say, though, it does not weigh 22.5kg  
and fit into a space no longer than 90cm  
no wider than 75.

Believe me—I gave it a shot.

Having split the zip of a 70L backpack, I accepted  
the impossibility of bringing myself

—baggage handlers being so careless with fragile items  
and security so quick to confiscate anything  
even vaguely resembling a terrorist threat.

Self went on a list  
underneath TV, yoga matt and bicycle  
—search for replacement on arrival.

I've been in Den Haag four months now.

I have my TV, yoga matt and bicycle.

And ...

I ...

Am ... sitting

in a downtown Chinese food court  
that looks, smells, sounds identical  
to the one in Adelaide's Central Markets.

The staff here speak Dutch as well as I do.

Our broken exchanges rock like small boats back  
and forth on a sea of Cantonese.

It is not Dutch, really, but our own new language,  
one we create as we go.

We have read the same phrasebooks  
learned the same idiosyncrasies.

'*Expat Dutch*,' I've heard people call it.

A Dutch shared by foreigners.

A Dutch the real Dutch don't understand.

It's a mooring point  
we can all tie to, however loosely,  
a place to exchange some simple, precious cargo.

We all stammer,  
all stumble, repeat and rephrase.

Somehow, we all understand.

Inhaling concoctions of honey, soy and ginger,

I manage to hitch a ride

on someone else's nostalgia bus.

Destination: not home, but the idea of home—any home.

What is home in Cantonese?

In Dutch it is *thuis*.

Except I'm not sure a *thuis* is a home.

*Thuis* is the building where you live.

It is not a land or town or suburb or smell or person or the songs of tiny birds ...

There is no such thing as 'this sick.'

Local. Foreigner.

*Nederlander. Buitenlander.*

These are all words

just like 'them' and 'us' are words.

The word 'we' is really I

and I and I and I and sometimes

I is *ik*

or *ich* or *ek* or *je* or *ja* or *tôi* or *aku* or *ego* ...

And as for me?

Well, I never topped my class in maths,

but through a lot of messy working out it seems,

there is no who I am,

only the whos I am becoming.

These cannot be plotted

on an XY graph

and joined, dot to dot

in some pretty zig zag

that peaks and crashes but inevitably returns

to the same basic trend lines,

the same patterns like a dancer

who only knows so many moves.



Even if you live in the same place  
your whole life,  
the points

are departures  
never an arrival—

We ain't the economy baby  
though baby, don't we sure sometimes try?

### **10. Coda**

Late morning, Den Haag.  
The wind, growing over-tired now,  
tries to smash all its second-hand toys.  
It kicks the tin can into a gutter,  
sends its catalogues down a canal.  
It goes for, but can't snatch  
the mousey brown hair of a woman  
who pushes on, despite the bluster,  
a woman who decides, right now, to stop  
watching her feet as she walks,  
decides to stare *her* city in the eye.