

IN AN ANTIQUE SHOP IN 'S-GRAVENHAGE

I met the proprietress
by asking, as I often do,
for a Victorian jelly mold.
Plump, jangling keys, somebody's grandmother,
she came to the door.
Listened, and in a voice
accented softer than a silk scarf
she said:
"No, I know what you search,
but none has come my way for years.
Look around, meneer.
You may find what you desire.
I have my tea."
And swayed through a curtain.

The shop was cluttered with majolica plates,
bisque one-eyed dolls lacking hair,
Chinese ceramic dogs,
tarnished copper coins.
A wooden plane, rusted on edge.
I heard her tea things clatter,
a slight whiff of fresh tobacco added
to the Victorian must.

In cases lay ivory belt buckles
stamped "Souvenir de Sénégal",
ladles and prints of Frisian fishermen,
scrimshaw and polished beads,
an infinity of cups.
I sidestepped a dark desk, and saw
two rocking chairs needing caning
cradling satanic andirons.

I was ready to leave. No sound
came from the back room
"Thank you, and goodbye," I said,
banging the door handle.
But a draft caught me,
billowed out the printed curtain,
propelled me to see her.
Closing the half-opened door
I went back,
knocked on the dark frame,
parted the curtain:

Neat space
confined by bureaus and mirrors
reflecting the source of the breeze —
an open window.
On the enameled table a teacup,
half a sandwich,
a tuliped vase, beige doily
a cigarette on a sculptured ashtray,
smoke still rising.
But nothing of her.
I closed the curtain and left.

Of such moments is life.
The screeches forgotten
the occasional true silences
etched in.
Mysterious details may be manufactured
in the telling. No matter —
for me:

Mevrouw will take her amber
tea with cress sandwiches, she'll
wear necklaces of sea lion teeth,
midst Lalique vases,
midst chiffoniers.
Then she will vanish
not into haze
not into crowds
but into the receptive keep
of my imagining mind.