

Myths and Traffic Lights

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Myths and Traffic Lights

Alara Adilow

*translated from Dutch
by Judith Wilkinson*

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CREON: You, however, tell me – not at length, but briefly – did you know that an edict had forbidden this?

ANTIGONE: I knew it. How could I not? It was public.

Antigone – Sophocles

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Introduction

Alara Adilow, born in 1988, is a Dutch poet of Somali descent. Her debut collection, *Mythen en stoplichten* (Myths and Traffic Lights), published in 2022, brought her instant recognition as a striking new voice in Dutch poetry. The book won the Herman de Coninck prize, the most important Flemish award for Dutch-language poetry, as well as the prestigious Buddingh prize for best poetry debut. It was also nominated for the Grote Poëzieprijs. The Buddingh prize jury wrote: '*Mythen en stoplichten* is a collection about identity, and takes the reader on an overwhelming, probing and transformative journey, from the underworld to the mortal world, even to the Heavens above. Adilow boldly opens every register of language. It is precisely through the grotesque, the coarse and the lyrical – and by drawing on myths, superstition and religion – that Adilow is able to grapple with her transition. Her poetry creates a universe that expands, shrinks, dies and reinvents itself.'

Adilow was born in Malindi, Kenya, during the civil war. Her Somali mother had emigrated to Kenya at a young age, together with her own mother and family. She married a Dutchman and was eventually able to emigrate to the Netherlands with Adilow and her sister. Adilow was then two years old. Some years after the marriage had broken down, her mother began a relationship with a Jamaican musician, based in England, to where she and her daughters later moved. Between the ages of 13 and 20, Alara lived in Leicester, where she attended a comprehensive school. It was during these years that she began to read voraciously and developed an interest in poetry, which instilled in her a longing to write her own poems. Aged 20, she returned to the Netherlands alone. Difficult years were to follow. Having had no Dutch secondary education, she had to reacquire herself with the Dutch language. Adilow refers to those years as an absolute low-point; she was homeless, and full of self-hatred. Eventually she was able to create a more stable life for herself, all the while finding an anchor in her writing.

By the age of 27, when she'd begun her process of transformation from man to woman, she had started working seriously on her collection. She immersed herself in Dutch poetry and performed her work at international festivals, including Read My World, Passa Porta and Crossing Border. Her earliest poems were rap, but she gradually moved away from that form. She also wrote essays on the subject of gender and transformation, a number

of which were published in *De Groene Amsterdammer*. In 2022 she won the El Hizrja prize for prose and became writer in residence for the queer and transgender community at Museum Arnhem. After the publication of *Mythen en stoplichten* she accepted an invitation for the international artists' collective Snowapple to become writer in residence at Casa Snowapple Mx in Mexico City, where she wrote a response to Donna Haraway's seminal feminist Cyborg Manifesto. In October 2023 she gave a series of workshops and lectures at the University of Capetown and at Stellenbosch University, at the invitation of the poet Alfred Schaffer. Currently she is working on a new poetry collection, a play, in collaboration with Neske Beks, and a novel, *Kijk es naar al dit licht* (Look at All This Light), which will be published in the Netherlands by De Bezige Bij in February 2025.

Adilow worked on *Mythen en stoplichten* for five years, during her transformation. Some of the poems took up to a year to complete. She would work on a poem for days at a stretch, then leave it alone, before returning to it with a fresh eye.

Her work has helped her come to terms with being transgender. In an interview with Thijs Joores in *Vuurland* she said: 'The collection is a very personal one, and I had to dig deep to write about my transition, about the ensuing break with my mother, and about my mother's background. I found very little existing poetry about queer and transgender issues. When I write about migration and give voice to a persona, I assume that person's place, as it were. I write urban poetry, in which I focus on my environment and the neighbourhood I came from, and my approach is almost sociological. Traffic lights say something about the way we treat each other in a city, they form a regulatory mechanism within society. They provide safety, but sometimes you wait for nothing, which can feel pointless and obstructive. The traffic lights form a sharp contrast to age-old myths, which transcend the material world.'

The collection has been widely reviewed. Maurice Broere, in *Meander Magazine*, emphasises the associative character of Adilow's language. He argues that the title conjures up multiple suggestions: mythology as something magical, in keeping with the many references to transformation in the collection, and myth as an unfounded presumption about a person or event. He points out that traffic lights are also a place where you have to stop, pause and be alert.

Geertjan Vugt, in a review in *De Volkskrant*, underlines how many of the poems are about the wounded body: 'Am I a wounded bird?/ Sometimes I think that the woman I've become grew from a wound' ('I'm Sorry 1'). And in a later poem, 'Your Wish Did Not Come True': 'All my

wounds are blossoming now'. Vugt writes: 'In literature, transitions can take place easily, but outside the world of literature, metamorphoses meet with resistance.'

Janita Monna, in a review in *Trouw*, comments: 'Adilow draws the reader into a dark, strange and grotesque world. Religion plays its part here, from traditional rituals (exorcisms) to an appearance of the Virgin Mary. We are presented with whoring, sexual fantasies, dreams, and a longing for "a space that doesn't exclude me". Sometimes Adilow is direct, at other times experiences are cloaked in words like "brand-new fabrics". The question of identity is explored through an expanding mosaic of images, memories and expectations: "My queerness is a fugue".'

Among the Dutch poets Adilow admires are Maria Barnas and Hannah Binsbergen, writers she prizes for their energised tone and playful use of language. In the interview in *Meander Magazine* she states: 'Although I am big fan of hermetic poets like Lucebert, Verhagen and Schierbeek, I also admire a poet like Justin Philip Reeds, who is able to write about memories, events and experiences in lucid terms. That seemed important when writing about my own experiences: I didn't want to exclude any reader by using hermetic language.'

When first reading *Mythen en stoplichten* I was immediately drawn in, and grew eager to translate the book. I was struck by the raw physicality and streetwise tone, and the powerful and often unsettling metaphors, often yoking together unusual images: 'STDs hung from the branches. / I fell into darkneses of language'; 'The light changed into a centipede and ate away the smile.' Adilow doesn't shy away from dark, uncomfortable experiences; instead, she offers them plainly or with grim humour: 'I sniff some poppers/take him into me as if he's my salvation/my horniness a fate'. And yet her poetry is also lyrical and sensual: 'Her breasts sacred dissertations. Her nipples the unruliness of deserts'. Adilow never indulges in the darkness, but she doesn't prettify either – and in that boldness she extends possible concepts of lyricism and sensuality. In a poem like 'You Wore a Crown of Willow Branches', where 'the sun looks like a larva in a swallow's nest', the lovers are 'two water beetles, creeping along a burning bush', and the poem contains other arrestingly paradoxical lines like: 'we are of slime and love.'

When I met Adilow in Groningen, after a reading that she'd given, she told me how she had struggled with the Dutch language at first. All the more surprising then that she is able to stretch the language and take the kinds of risks you'd expect only from a native speaker.

The process of translation was relatively straightforward, as the poems seemed to lend themselves to translation, perhaps in part because the experiences conveyed are not tied specifically to a Dutch context. Adilow's English is excellent, making it easy to discuss nuances and potential translation dilemmas. I was grateful for the freedom she gave me, as she tended to suggest only minor changes here and there. I tried to remain as close as possible to the *parlando* tone, the raw directness, and the poetry's coupling of concrete and more abstract, philosophical language, allowing the physical and the conceptual to intertwine. Where the poems create startling imaginative connections I sometimes considered making the transitions more flowing by turning full-stops into commas, but in the end decided to preserve most of the staccato effects, as they contribute to the poems' energy. The rap poems, such as 'Do You Remember' and 'Dream Song', were the biggest challenge, as I wanted to mimic the punchy rhymes as much as possible.

I believe Adilow brings something novel and fresh to poetry, both thematically and in her language and leaping imagery. Her collection takes the reader on a long and haunting journey, from catabasis to anabasis, from being 'filled with cries' to a perhaps more calmly reflective place. Towards the end of the collection, Adilow looks back on 'the hullabaloo of the past', and on all that she has gone through:

In poetry I found an unfurling expansion, a feeling of sprouting,
as if I were a plant in language. As if I were more than a box of
exposés stored in a body.

Judith Wilkinson

CATABASIS

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Water

I know no speck so troublesome as self.
George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Beach

The tide turns while I
try
to relax in the sand.

Where does the water end
and where do my thighs begin.
My children and I stare at the sails
the parasols and the fish-and-chips stand.

Gulls drag my experiences through the shade.

The sky is narrow and dry.
I close my eyes
listen to the breeze and the lashing of the waves.
For moments I escape this body
flow past the white spume
with a flock of gulls.

Mother's voice murmurs in the sea
or is it my soul that I hear?

Sea

Some say the sea is a true beauty
all I see is wounds and running sores.
Mer, bahari, lahr, بحر, sea, meer, okun.

*There's no difference between the aggression of an abstract concept
and material reality.*

Sea of obsolete symbols
created by the chaos of sunlight.
Her freedom is her shapelessness.

She is always at once in and outside herself.
Images she gargled up from her depths shatter on the coast.
Language lays layers of reality on every (water) body.

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Youth

I want a heart of sound instead of this heart full of blood.

I am filled with cries
of what has pursued me since I was a young girl.

At the time I thought that what pursued me
was friendly
but as I grew older I began to doubt that.

We licked our lollipops.
We stuck out our tongues
'see, it's changed colour,' we boasted
and while we feasted on the lollipops,
the transformation was the real delight.

SAMPLE

The Grave

My children are crouching on my mother's gravestone.
They ask grandma who is going to pay the bills.

I tug at their wrists, and point out:
Bills are not for the dead.
Don't ask grandma that.

Let her rest under the roots of the lavender
far from the razor-sharp light.
Come, water the lavender and rake the leaves off my grave

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Needle of the Sun

I smoke my last joint
meet a man in the park, have a bath at his place
wash ashes and earth off my buttocks.

The morning light scratches open my intoxication like a sore
experiences flow through the pale bathroom like puss.

The dim light falls through the dusty curtain.
His dick swells like a riot
mine is a baby lettuce.

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Take half an x and three millimetres of GHB
slip into a Hunkemöller lingerie set
that you bought second-hand on eBay

Put on red lipstick and fishnet stockings and stilettos
feel yourself better placed in the world.

Let your clothes detach your consciousness
from this unbearable male body.

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