



Koos Meinderts

To the North

Illustrated by Annette Fienieg

Fiction | 13 x 21 cm | 160 pages | Age: 10+

WINNER SILVER PENCIL 2017

NOMINATED FOR THE GOLDEN PENCIL 2017

HIGHLIGHTED BY THE DUTCH FOUNDATION FOR LITERATURE

It is wartime, it is winter and food is running out in the big cities. With a large group of other poor, malnourished Dutch children, Jaap, Nel and little Kees travel by canal boat to the countryside in the north where there is still enough food.

Jaap is separated from his sister and brother and lodged with a childless couple, far from home. He must literally fight for his place

in his new world, where everything is unfamiliar.

Meanwhile, the war rumbles on, and he wonders when he will see his parents again. Are they still alive? And how are Nel and little Kees getting on?

To the North is based on the evacuation of children during the Dutch famine in the last year of the Second World War. Thousands of children left by ship, bus or lorry for temporary foster homes in Groningen, Friesland and Drenthe. Through the fictional characters of Jaap, Nel and little Kees, Koos Meinderts has given these children a face and a voice.

The Jury of the Silver Pencil 2017 on *To the North*:

'Jaap is the story's first-person narrator. We learn of the events through him in masterful combinations of observation, commentary, memory and feeling. (...) a wonderful book in which Koos Meinderts gives a penetrating account in plain language of a boy's development in wartime.'

Press on *To the North*

'The book's strength lies in those often harrowing details, which evoke a living portrait of an era and make the suffering palpable. After his recently award-winning young adult novel *Seeing the Sea*, Meinderts once again delivers a wonderful book, which is also tastefully designed and illustrated.' – *Trouw*

'The boy's despair and panic are captured so convincingly that you will experience stomachache while reading. (...) Koos Meinderts chooses his images with care. They show how war affects a child's life and how innocence is lost forever.' – **** *Het Parool*

'Koos Meinderts makes accurate observations, in restrained language. The reader can sense the overtones of every sentence (...) With few words, Meinderts manages to say a great deal (...) and so palpably that you sympathise with everything the three children experience.' – *Friesch Dagblad*

'A poignant story, (...) a seemingly simple style with subtle asides.' – *Dagblad van het Noorden*

'Once again [Meinderts] has managed to get inside the mind of a boy and communicate his thoughts and feelings believably in plain, apt language.' – *jaapleest.nl*

'Meinderts does not need many words to give the story feeling; in a short phrase or an image he grabs the reader by the throat.' – *kinderboekenpraatjes.nl*

Koos Meinderts (born 1953) has written more than fifty books, including picture books like *De vuurtoren* (The Lighthouse), poetry collections like *Het regent zonlicht* (It's Raining Sunlight) and two novels for young adults: *Lang zal ze leven* (Long May She Live) and *De zee zien* (To See the Sea), which won the Flemish Boekenleeuw award. In 2003 *Emperor and the Story Father* was awarded a Flag and Pennant. He won a Silver Pencil in 2009 for *Ballad of Death* and in 2017 for *To the North*. Meinderts has also written musicals and many song lyrics. Books by Meinderts have been translated into Afrikaans, Chinese, Danish, German, English, French, Kurdish, Norwegian, Spanish, Swedish and Japanese.

For information about foreign rights, please get in touch with

Elaine Michon elaine@elami-agency.com

Excerpts: *To the North*, Koos Meinderts (Hoogland & Van Klaveren)

Translation by Laura Watkinson

pp. 7–13

PART ONE

HUNGER

1

In the middle of the night

Just when I was thinking I had imagined it, I heard it again, a long, animal scream, like the wailing of a wounded dog.

My little brother, in the bed beside me, had heard nothing. That did not surprise me at all. Nothing woke up Little Kees. Even if you clattered a bag of marbles onto a metal plate right next to his face, he would still go on sleeping. The shrieking reminded me of the screams that came from the crazy people behind the walls of the Rozenhove psychiatric hospital at night. But it could not possibly be coming from there. Rozenhove had been emptied two years ago. The lunatics had to make way for soldiers.

I was not too upset when they had to move. There was a high wall around the clinic, to be fair, and a canal in front of it, but if a madman was angry enough, then he could easily climb over the wall, run across the water to the other side, and before you knew it, he would be standing over your bed with a knife, ready to cut your throat.

“You have too much imagination,” my mother said.

It was a Sunday in May when they came to fetch them. The cow parsley along the canal was in full bloom, as if it had been snowing in just that one patch. I stood at the gate behind our house with Father, Mother, Little Kees and my sister Nel, watching as the mad people were driven away down the sandy track in municipal buses.

The neighbours came outside as well. All of us stood there with our own families at our own gates. *No service*, it said on the front of the buses.

“Why are they banging on the windows?” Little Kees wanted to know, and I asked where they were taking the mad people. “To their families?”

“Would you stop calling them that, Jaap?” said Mother. “They’re not mad, they’re ill.”

We waited until the buses had disappeared from view and the dust – it had not rained for days – had settled, and then everyone went back inside, except for Mother. She walked to the washing rack that Father had made for her in the field behind our house. My brother followed her. He was going to help Mother by handing her the clothes pegs. She hung up the washing, and then Little Kees hid behind the sheets, which swayed gently back and forth in the breeze.

I pulled the covers over my head and curled up as small as possible. But for the high singing of the wind in the wires of the telegraph poles, it was eerily quiet outside.

I could not get back to sleep, and so I began an alphabet of things that were nice to eat. I often used to make up alphabets when I lay awake at night. One time I would list animals, and another time it would be children from my class or from our neighbourhood. This time it was tasty food: A is for apples, B is for broccoli, C is for chocolate milk. Broccoli, did I say broccoli? Is that tasty? I hated broccoli, but I would have killed for some right then. Even the way Grandma made it. She always left it on the heat for too long so it went soggy and then she would drop a pile of green gloop onto the plate with a dollop of watery sauce, whether you wanted it or not.

I was just about to continue my alphabet of tasty food when I heard more screaming. Even Little Kees seemed to have heard it. He turned over, groaned and went on sleeping.

The screams were coming from downstairs, from the front room, where my parents slept. They hadn’t come for my father, had they, like they did with Mr De Vries at the end of the street?

Two soldiers had recently kicked down his front door in the middle of the night and taken him away. He did not even have time to get dressed properly. With his feet bare and dressed only in a cotton vest and a pair of long johns, he was pushed into a car, with his hands up.

Sadly I hadn't seen it myself, but Hans, who lived in the house opposite De Vries, told me about it.

"It was hilarious. His flaps were wide open, and you could see his cock."

I pushed off the blankets and slipped out of bed. The lino was cold on my feet. I felt around for my jumper and socks, then put them on and walked out of the bedroom in the dark. Closing the door behind me, I tiptoed to the stairs.

There was no need to be that quiet, though, as the screams were drowning out every other sound. What on earth was going on?

Halfway down the stairs, I bumped into Nel. She was sitting against the banister, hugging her knees.

"It's started," she said.

I sat down next to her.

"What's started?"

"The contractions," said Nel. "I really hope we get a sister."

A two-minute sister

We got a sister, a nameless sister without a face. Not quite the sister Nel had been hoping for. It had only lived for a couple of minutes. Had Mother sensed that would happen? Was that why she had screamed so much?

The baby was in the shed, inside one of Father's shoeboxes. Men's shoes, black, Bata, size 45. She was not given a coffin.

"We really need the wood for the stove," Father said.

He would take her to the cemetery later. We were not allowed to go with him and we were not allowed to see her either.

I wondered where in the cemetery she would be buried. Among the children's graves, next to Lowietje Prins?

Lowietje was in my class at infant school. He had water on the brain, cried all the time and often peed his pants. Was it to drain all that extra water from his head?

One day Lowietje's chair was empty. He was dying. I went to his house and rang the bell. His mother answered the door.

"So kind of you, Jaap," she said, leading me into the room where Lowietje lay, his round head like a full moon on his pillow. I wasn't there for Lowietje, though. I went out of curiosity.

I sat by his bed for a while, until his mother came to fetch me. Lowietje had slept all the time I was there, and he hardly even moved. "Bye, Lowietje," I said.

"He's not going to wake up again, Jaap," his mother said.

When I left, she gave me an apple for the way home and stroked my hair. I threw the apple away. I didn't trust it. You don't just get water on the brain for no reason.

That same week, Lowietje died. I sometimes went to take a look at his grave. *In memory of Louis*, it said in stern letters on his gravestone. He shared his grave with his brother, who had died four years before him and was also called Louis, just like him. The Louis brothers had been baptised and had received the sacrament of the sick. My sister had not. I was afraid that she would be buried in an unmarked grave. In unconsecrated ground, among the sinners. My sister, a sinner. What sins could she have committed in those couple of minutes she was there? And did it mean she wouldn't go to Heaven?

“That’s not our decision to make,” said my grandmother, who had moved in and was looking after us while Mother had to rest in bed.

Father put on his coat. Nel and I saw him go into the shed and, a little later, come back out with our shoebox sister. Grandma made the sign of the cross.

“Everything’s fine,” she said. “Everything’s fine.”

Earlier I had heard her saying to Father that the poor child had not stood a chance anyway.

“She’s been spared so much suffering, Kees,” she said. “Helena’s just skin and bone. There’s no way she could squeeze out so much as a drop of milk.”

Helena was our mother’s name, and Nel was named after her. Who would our sister have been named after if she had stayed alive?

Wiesje would have been a nice name for our two-minute sister. Wiesje sounds like a breath of wind. Barely there.

My father carried the shoebox the way you carry a baby, in his arms. He looked up at us, shrugged helplessly and walked out through the gate.

Bye, Wiesje.

An hour later, Father was back. Without the box. Grandma asked how it had gone. “It can’t have been easy, Kees. Wasn’t the ground frozen solid?”

Father did not reply. He walked past her to Mother. I could hear him crying through the closed door.

Father never cried.

pp. 60–67

PART TWO

ON OUR WAY

13

Little ship in Jesus' care

We had been on our way for only a short time, three days, maybe four, but it felt as if we had been travelling for weeks. To be on the safe side, we usually sailed at night, and only very occasionally in the daytime. We often stopped for hours at a time.

I had been hoping that they would open up the hatches every now and then, and that we would be allowed to go ashore. Just to get away for a while from the stink of more than eighty children and four adults in that cramped, dark space. To stretch our legs and breathe in some fresh air. That was what we had been promised, but every time we asked the group leaders, we were told we couldn't.

Too dangerous.

Not yet.

Maybe later.

We could forget about it today as well. It was hailing and the wind had started blowing up a storm. The hail drummed on the hatches and the wind made a terrifying noise, first growling, and then shrieking and whistling. The tarpaulin rattled and the hatches clattered. It felt as if they might go flying off at any moment.

In various spots, the hail was coming in through the cracks, and the ship was taking on water at the sides.

We sat huddled together in the middle of the hold. Walking was impossible, as the ship was swaying up and down on the waves, as if you were on the caterpillar ride at the fair with the canopy down over the car, so that you had no idea whether you were going up or down.

Suddenly there was an enormous bang. A storm! Little Kees clapped his hands over his ears.

"Are you scared?" I asked.

"I'm angry," he said.

Nel was too busy calming Wiesje to be scared herself. And what about me? I didn't like storms. Just like Mother. Whenever there was a storm at night, she would make us get out of bed and we'd sit at the table in our pyjamas and wait until it was over. With every flash of lightning, she made the sign of the cross and with every clap of thunder she cowered in fright. It did not bother Father in the slightest, though. Either he slept through it or he stood at the window with his arms crossed, looking out at the storm. He enjoyed every flash of lightning.

"It's just God saying hello. Free fireworks."

There was another huge bang. The storm must be right above us now.

I saw Mrs Segaar and Ankie making the sign of the cross. Were they frightened too? Miss Keuler had stood up and was wobbling her way over to a boy of about four who had started wailing.

His crying was contagious and before long there was shrieking too.

Ankie Segaar clapped her hands.

"We're going to sing a song," she said.

Ankie liked songs and games, and she was really good at drawing too. She had shown me her sketchbook. Beautiful. I especially liked the portraits, one portrait in particular, a watercolour of Henk, a boy of her age.

"Who's Henk?" I asked her. "Your brother?"

She blushed.

"Oh, just someone I know," she said, and she quickly leafed through her sketchbook and showed me a coloured drawing of a robin and a hawfinch.

"It's like they could fly off the paper at any moment," I said. "I wish I could do that."

"Everyone can draw," said Ankie. She had also done a few drawings on the boat. With charcoal, as that was the only material she had. She would have liked to study at art school, but then the war happened.

"Little ship in Jesus' care," said Ankie. "Everyone sing along!"

She started singing, and hesitantly we joined in, but it soon became louder and louder as we struggled to make ourselves heard above the noise of the storm and the hail:

Little ship in Jesus' care,

*Sailing safely on the waves,
With the cross upon its flag,
As it carries those he saves.
Though the storm may rage and blow,
And the ocean crash and roar,
We have our Father's Son on board,
And ahead of us the shore.*

I imagined I was at school, in the choir room. Above the high singing of our young voices, I heard the warm, deep rumble of our teacher, Mr Vogelzang: *Where the white tops of the dunes shine in the rays of the sun.*

He liked teaching us songs like that, songs that he said reminded us how beautiful our small country is.

Headmaster Alberts would have none of it though, as we found out when he walked down the corridor one day just as we were singing *Every man has his own land, and there he lives in peace*. Without knocking, he stepped into the classroom and crooked his index finger to indicate that our teacher should follow him into the hallway, as if he were plucking a troublesome child out of the classroom.

The door was slightly open and we heard Alberts say to Vogelzang that he did not appreciate him bringing politics into school. I didn't understand what was going on. I told Father about it when I got home.

"That Alberts is no good," he said, and then I understood even less.

Led by Ankie, we sang a few more songs. It seemed to help, and the crying quietened down. The hail subsided, and the storm blew over. But the wind did not give up.

Seasick

I only just made it in time. Heaving away, I leaned over the toilet bucket. What little food was still in my stomach was violently ejected and I went on retching until yellow liquid was all that came up.

I was not the only one who was ill. Just about everyone on board was seasick, including the group leaders and maybe even the skipper too, because the rocking of the ship seemed to be getting worse and worse, as if it were out of control.

I staggered back to our spot, where I saw that Nel, who had just said she was feeling fine, was now kneeling with her head between her arms. She had suddenly become sick too. She didn't make it to the bucket, she didn't even try, there was no stopping it and, like so many other children all around us, she vomited into the straw. For once, she could not keep her eye on the baby.

"Look after Hanneke," she told Little Kees, who was one of the few who was not suffering at all. Even the sour smell of the vomit was not affecting him.

"Hanneke?" said Kees.

"Wiesje," I said quickly. "Do as Nel says, Kees. Take care of Wiesje."

Looking back, maybe it was not such a good idea to call her Wiesje. It was not the first time we had called the baby by her real name. Luckily, it had always been out of earshot of the group leaders.

Yet again I wondered why the mother had left her baby behind. Our parents had also let us go, but that was different. Wiesje was a baby, she was alone. We had each other and could look after ourselves. And even though our parents did not know exactly where we would end up or with whom, we were in safe hands. Our journey to the north had been organised by the church. Ankie had told us that yesterday, when she asked if she could draw us. Me and Nel with Wiesje on her lap.

When she had finished, she showed us the drawing. Just like a Christmas card. Nel and I as Joseph and Mary in the straw, and Wiesje as the baby Jesus. Little Kees with his blond curls could easily have joined us as a cherub, but he did not want to be drawn.

The wind had quietly died down, and the rocking of the ship had eased. I had a nasty taste in my mouth, and my legs felt weak and wobbly, but the worst of the sickness was over. Everyone seemed to be slowly recovering.

We were given fresh water to drink and Miss Keuler and Mrs Segaar opened one of the hatches. Light and air came pouring into the hold. All of the children huddled together to get as close as possible to the open hatch, but Miss De Jong sent us back to our places. It was terribly dangerous for us all to be on the same side of the boat, she said. Did we want to drown? No, we didn't, did we?

Miss Keuler understood, though. We were longing for fresh air. The bigger children were allowed to take it in turns to pop their heads out for a moment, standing on a box.

Luckily I didn't have to wait long for my turn. And although it was so cold, I enjoyed the wind blowing through my hair. It was early in the morning. We were sailing under a grey sky past a vast polder landscape with here and there a windmill or a farmhouse. A big bird of prey perched on a post in a nearby meadow, and a pair of blue overalls flapped on a washing line in the distance.

Was it war here too? I couldn't imagine that. It was like looking at the country in Mr Vogelzang's song: *Every man has his own land, and there he lives in peace.*

pp. 138–142

PART THREE

THE NORTH

34

A clog full of pee

Everything was fine for a long time. Tjeerd ignored me and I ignored him, but I was on my guard. I did my best to be invisible, I was no longer the first to put up my hand when the teacher asked a question, I tried not to say that everything was “interesting” and I stopped taking my drawings to school.

I didn’t bother with anyone. I was there, and that was enough. I walked on my own to and from school and, once I got home, I usually stayed inside and sat at the table, drawing or reading.

“You’ll ruin your eyes, lad, with all that reading,” Mr Schut often said. “Go outside and play. That’s much healthier.”

I did go outside but only early in the morning, when everyone else was still asleep. I would go for a walk, usually to the bridge across the canal, where I looked out over the water and hoped that the *Nooitgedacht* would appear in the distance, with Little Kees in the cabin, and that the boat would moor up and I could go on board. It was nonsense, of course. Little Kees didn’t even live with Klaas, but with one of the skipper’s sisters. I had no idea where that might be. I wondered how it was all going to work out when the war was finally over.

I made sure I was back home in time from my morning walks. One time, though, I was so deep in thought that I did not hear the church bell chiming, so I was late for breakfast and had to eat my porridge cold. I had to spoon it down quickly, or I was going to be late for school too.

When I was halfway there, I realised I wasn’t going to make it. I took off my clogs, so I could go more quickly, and began to run.

There was quite a strong wind that day, and I enjoyed running. I would have liked to go on running the whole day long, with the wind at my back. Wonderful. I wasn’t running, I was flying. But I still got there after the bell. The other children

were already sitting there when I stepped into the classroom with a red face. As punishment, I had to stand in the corner. I didn't care. I'd had such a lovely run.

When I'd started to forget Tjeerd a little and almost saw him as just another classmate, someone you could ask a normal question like anyone else – *Can I borrow your eraser?* – and you would get a normal answer – *Yeah, here you are* – he struck again.

It was on a Saturday, when we had only a half-day at school. Everyone else had already left, but it was my turn that day to water the plants and to clean the blackboard.

"See you tomorrow, sir," I said when I had finished.

The teacher was sitting at his desk, marking books.

"See you tomorrow, Jaap," he said.

In the corridor I put on my coat and cap. So far so good. But when I placed my right foot in my clog, I pulled it straight back out, quick as a flash. There was water in the clog. Then I bent down and realised that it wasn't water, but pee.

Yuck, someone had done a pee in my clog!

Tjeerd's laughing face appeared from behind a cupboard in the corridor.

I ran at him, with the clog in my hand, threw the pee in his face and then lashed out at him, first with my clog, and then with my fists. Tjeerd fell backwards and banged his head on the cupboard. He collapsed and lay on the floor, perfectly still. A puddle of blood formed on the tiles beside his head.

For a moment I stood there, not knowing what to do. There he lay, my tormentor. Floored. When he came to visit me that time when I was sick and I told him to sod off or I'd punch him in the face, he had said: "You wouldn't dare." Not then, no. But now I had dared and I was proud of myself. The monster was defeated. Then I walked back into the classroom and said in a calm voice: "Sir, Tjeerd fell over, by the cupboard in the corridor. He's bleeding."

And while Mr Rijper was leaning over Tjeerd, I walked past behind them and out of the school. It was only when I got outside that I began to panic. I crossed the playground, walked through the gates and started to run.

I had no idea where I was running to. But definitely as far as possible from school, where Tjeerd was lying in the corridor with his head bleeding. I didn't dare to go home. Mr and Mrs Schut wouldn't want to have anything else to do with me. I could already hear Mrs Schut saying: "What? You beat up Tjeerd? That nice boy who was the only one in your class

to visit you when you were ill? The boy you borrowed all those lovely books from? We were so wrong about you, Jaap. We don't want you in our house anymore."

When I reached the windmill at the edge of the village, I started walking more slowly. I suddenly realised I still had the pee clog on my foot. I sat down in the grass beside the stream, took off my socks and clogs, put my right foot in the ice-cold water and washed off the pee. Then, lying on my stomach, I pulled my clog through the water a few times.

I looked up at the windmill, on the other side of the water. I sighed. It was the first thing I had seen, not all that long ago, when I had arrived in the village on the back of the cart driven by the man with the square head. I was tired then, and cold, and dying of hunger. Now I was panicking: I had just knocked someone unconscious, maybe even murdered him, and I didn't know where to go.

I was terrified by the thought that Tjeerd might be dead, and then I'd be a murderer and I'd go to hell. I had committed a mortal sin: Thou shall not kill. I had to confess, but they didn't do confession in Mr and Mrs Schut's church.

I missed Mother. "What you did wasn't good, Jaap," she would say. "But I understand. Come here, son." And she'd sit me on her lap.

If only I had put my angel in my pocket, then at least I would have had something from home with me, but home felt more distant than ever. The war had separated us, and it was anyone's guess if we would ever see one another again.

I leaped to my feet. Suddenly I knew where I could go.

Nel!

I would go to Nel.



For information about foreign rights, please get in touch with Elaine Michon
elaine@elami-agency.com