

*A mysterious and poetic tale of love
and life by the author of The Virtuoso*

Margriet de Moor (b. 1941) studied singing, piano and history before her first collection of stories, *Op de rug gezien* (Seen At The Back), was published in 1988. She was immediately regarded as a very gifted author. The universality of her subject matter and her polished, light-hearted style of writing ensured her a high reputation with both the reading public as well as the critics. Her books have been shortlisted for numerous prestigious Dutch and international prizes. In 1990 she won the AKO Literature Prize for her first novel *Eerst grijs, dan wit, dan blauw* (*First Grey Then White Then Blue*), which was translated into eleven languages. This was followed in 1993 by *De virtuoos* (*The Virtuoso*), a love story full of music and light about a noblewoman and a castrato in 18th century Naples. After this she published another collection of stories and the novel *Hertog van Egypte* (Duke of Egypt, 1996). This last novel is a melancholy love story which takes place at the time of the persecution of gypsies in the Second World War and after. With her latest novel *Zee-Binnen* De Moor proves herself once again to be a daring writer of great expertise.

*Margriet de Moor's new novel is an
astounding example of the art of writing.*

HAAGSE COURANT

*An intriguing, intelligent tale about ordinary
people, who, to their own great surprise discover
that they are more complex than they
had realised. A beautiful, balanced novel.*

HAARLEMS DAGBLAD

MARGRIET DE MOOR



photo Ronald Hoeben

Zee-binnen *The Sea Road*

Those who have been dazzled by the beauty of brightly-coloured fields of flowers in full bloom immediately behind the dunes of the Dutch coast, will be familiar with the landscape of Margriet de Moor's fourth novel. *Zee-Binnen* opens with: 'Let's just call this the story of a road.'

It is on this road that he happens to find a woman's diary with her name written inside. He is seized by an obsessive love for the owner, a woman who he doesn't know, about whom he has all sorts of fantasies, and with whom he later has a short affair. In the past, several inexplicable accidents have also occurred along this path, which have led to dramatic changes in the lives of many of the villagers.

Although the adulterous relationship between the vet and his lover forms the plot of this book, *Zee-Binnen* is not primarily a novel about love. It touches upon another, less tangible level of experience by suggesting that people's lives are intertwined without their being aware of it; that we are joined by invisible, but nevertheless very real, ties which determine our happiness. Everything is connected, De Moor seems to convey between the lines, only we seldom realise it. There is no such thing as coincidence.

It is this mysterious undercurrent running through *Zee-Binnen* which gives it its sense of repressed tension and which makes a direct appeal to the reader's imagination. Also the highly suggestive, often poetic use of language, admirably reinforces the eerie atmosphere of the novel, in which present and past blend together. 'The past is paper-thin,' reflects one of the main characters, 'and the future a blank page.' When you finally close the book, you know more, but not everything. Here lies the literary power of Margriet de Moor.

PUBLISHING DETAILS

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RIGHTS

Uitgeverij Querido
Singel 262
1016 AC Amsterdam
TEL. +31 20 551 12 62
FAX +31 20 620 35 09

SELECTED TRANSLATED TITLES

Die Verabredung (*Zee-Binnen*). München: Hanser, 2000.
Duc d'Égypte (*Hertog van Egypte*). Paris: Seuil, 1999. Also in German (Hanser), Hungarian (Europa) and in English (Picador / Arcade, in prep.). *The Virtuoso* (*De virtuoos*). London: Picador, 1996. Also in German (Hanser), French (Robert Laffont), Spanish (Emece), Italian

(Garzanti), Swedish (Norstedts), Norwegian (Gyldendal), Portuguese (Asa) and many other countries.

First grey, then white, then blue (*Eerst grijs, dan wit, dan blauw*). London: Picador, 1994. Also in German (Hanser), French (Robert Laffont), Spanish (Emece), Swedish (Norstedts), Danish (Samleren) and Norwegian (Gyldendal).



Foundation for
the Production and
Translation of
Dutch Literature

Singel 464
NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam
TEL. 31 20 620 62 61
FAX +31 20 620 71 79
E-MAIL office@nlpvf.nl
WEBSITE www.nlpvf.nl

Sample translation from

The Sea Road by Margriet de Moor
(Amsterdam: Querido, 2000)

Translated by Arnold and Erica Pomerans

1

Let's just call this the story of a road. After all, the world does not consist solely of beings with eyes and hands, everybody knows that, so why shouldn't the main character of a story be a road? Blind and deaf, we may assume, and moreover with certain characteristics that we fail to appreciate? All right then, why not?

It is late at night. It is raining. The rain falls lightly on the land, drizzling down onto the village and then moving on to the roundabout where the fields end and the sea road begins, climbing a little after a stretch across the flat land to end up at Ruigrokseslag beach. Only last night a car containing an elderly married couple had an accident here. The emergency call reached the police just after midnight and they could tell at once that it was serious. A shocking event, but all too common on this road. And indeed these victims did not survive their short journey. The two of them had been on their way home from a family visit, but had not been drinking. It is true that the husband must have been driving very fast, but that ought not to have been a problem on this well-maintained road, unobstructed as it is by any trees. Absorbed in their conversation, the couple had been caught off-guard during the final moments of their lives, when to their horror they had suddenly seen a small truck belonging to De Wit, the bulb exporters, making straight for them.

They had been driving on the wrong side of the road.

There isn't any explanation. No one here can give you a valid reason why there should have been a crash here every other day over the past year, caused not only by outsiders but quite as much by people who have been born and brought up

in these parts. Right now it is spring, April. It has been observed that the accidents increase in number and severity during 'the season', when the road is a corridor, a vein of gleaming asphalt between miles and miles of white, blue and pink.

Hyacinth geometry, without a trace of naturalness. All theories based on the light have to be discarded: you quietly drive your car from the 'Sea' one way to the 'Town' in the other, it is a moonless night and pitch dark. Without so much as a sliver of light, the earth ought to appear as a black mass, but look, from behind the windscreen you observe that, as far as the horizon, the fields appear just as they do in broad daylight. Perfectly composed configurations of colour. You loll backwards. Your hands on the wheel feel a touch too good for mere mechanics and technology. A glorious peace has taken possession of you. Your foot on the accelerator begins to reflect the desire to get to where you were going. Not so outrageous a feeling, is it?

These crazy journeys are not, of course, due to the flowers. People around here are awakened by sirens in the summer, winter and autumn, too. And then the fields are bare or covered with stubble. There are those here who claim that, in the spring, the road lures its victims on their way back from the 'Sea', and during the other three seasons, on the way there. There may indeed be something in that. But what does it prove? People want to go to the seaside all the year round. They pick the Old Sea Road because it gives them pleasure. That is more or less, all there is to it. They have no urgent business there. The bends and the parallel ditches, the approach roads to the bulb nurseries, the views which, no matter how you look at them, consist largely of skies, grey, bright or black, are not noted down in anyone's diary.

16 April

2

Late at night. It is still raining (not hard, just drizzling, with a bit of a wind). And under the street lamp something is lying on the pavement. A something, a tangible object this time that, without any visible energy, and without any previous history worth mentioning, succeeds in maintaining a tenuous presence in what we are about to describe. What has happened here? A woman had been scrabbling through her handbag while standing beside the cash machine. Though she knew almost for certain that her card was in the side pocket of her purse, she had to pull out her wallet, her diary, her comb and her handkerchief to find the wretched thing - aha, it had slipped into a folded leaflet from a perfumery! A car had splashed past. Her own car stood waiting by the pavement. How natural in that situation to quickly finish your transaction, to grab your bits and pieces and make a dash for it. When you toss your handbag onto the front seat you are as good as home. All you have to do now is take the Old Sea Road, turn right just before the dunes and after about a quarter of a mile the front of your house comes into view. A bare grey stone building, which is the way they like to build houses in these parts. Under the lamp with the house number and name, it could just as easily read 'Loading and Unloading'. Still, inside the front door there is a warm entrance hall with a mirror opposite the coat rack. You walk up to the mirror to, once again, examine the portrait of the woman against a backdrop of inverted pleats and sleeves. Neck and shoulders, all in frontal view. A not ungracious expression: she's well aware that she is standing in a two-storeyed house, with all modern conveniences, not forgetting the huge bulb store next to it. Such large old houses always have a part to play in true family sagas, sometimes overflowing with drama, at other times quite banal....

Meanwhile a small book lost from a handbag is lying under the streetlamp next to the cash machine. A little diary, with a plastic cover and perforated triangles at the bottom of every page, each of which has in fact been faithfully

4

torn off until today. If no one picks it up, whatever has been written in that small calendar will dissolve tonight into an ink-black smudge. The street grows quieter and quieter. Just one late pedestrian crosses over from the square and approaches, his coat hanging open, his face turned towards the lead-grey paving stones.

3

Yes, he picks it up. Stops for a moment. Quickly runs his thumb over the little pages. What should he do? None of the personal details have been filled in. Chuck it into someone's front garden? He makes a surprised sound. And when he leaves the cash machine recess (which affords shelter and privacy), the thing is in his coat pocket.

This night is not like any other. When his wife had gone to bed at about eleven, he had sat in the living room for a bit longer before following her up. And now it is close to midnight and he is walking down a street. In the meantime he had looked around the bedroom, peering from side to side and then downwards. His wife was asleep. Noor is the kind of woman who falls asleep without a sound, but sometimes, after an hour or so, she strikes up a conversation in her sleep. He still finds her beautiful. Noor's beauty, her white skin, the dark hair that springs in abundance from her white forehead and temples, has grown along with him in the course of their marriage. He still cannot detect any wrinkles in her neck, any line under her eyes. His fourteen-year infatuation screens her from his direct gaze.

Why should the details of your life not be slightly rearranged by some incident, so that a few other details can emerge? Quietly, harmlessly, compellingly. The onset of a series of changes? Pensively he looks at the face of his wife, who expects nothing more than that in a few minutes he will be lying down beside her.

The night decides otherwise, this night resembling no other night, but rather the sober, cool morning of the day on which you set out on a long journey. Only on his side of the double bed was the light still on. When he thought back to this moment, later on, it seemed as if the room had been inexplicably uninhabited,

with random objects on the walls and not an article of clothing in sight. He turned on his heel, went down the stairs and opened the front door. Vincent Lucas was forty years old, a man to whom it would never ever have occurred to leave his wife.

He walks down the street. His blue gabardine coat is hanging open and he is not wearing a scarf. Tomorrow morning, no question about it, he will arrive on time by car in Utrecht and go and scrub his hands and arms up to the elbows on the first floor of the university clinic for pet animals. He operates there three times a week and on two other days holds a surgery at home in an extension of his house on the corner, with its high, elegant windows, and a garden with a swing; their daughter is ten: pretty, bright little Sonia who has her breakfast served up twice a week by the maid, a Portuguese woman, because her mother, Noor that is, starts work at half past eight. This has been going on for years.

So far so good, but who has not experienced that occasional fit of madness, that fatal self-pity, to put it at its mildest, because a line has been drawn, legally and permanently, under the most important aspect of your life? Who is not absolutely certain in his heart of hearts that the real encounter is yet to come?

For no good reason he turns a corner into another street. Above him a cloud is shaped like an imaginary map of the world. Right in front of him a blue-green Volvo, registration number DD-GD-83, speeds across the intersection. Of course these are messages, but you just try and decode them. He notices a monumental building being put up on the square. Scaffolding, planking, canvas sheeting and masts inexorably bring to mind a clipper gliding by in the gentle breeze. He crosses the road, his view changes. Then comes the moment when he is holding a small diary in his hands, looking at it, thinking of throwing it away, planning to abandon this foundling when, by the nearest chance, his eyes fall on his own name on one of the pages. Of all things!

17 April

4

Lying in bed reading, he suddenly feels a bit feverish. All around him, it is warm and still. Not the normal stillness, but the kind when you suddenly dive into the water and become aware that in the depths some immense form of life is breathing and rumbling, formless, making no distinction between you and your surroundings. '11.15, dentist,' he reads, and turns the page curiously. 'Shopping, see Friday.' He leafs backwards. 'Stockings, pills, curtain hooks.' When he looks up, the room is a palette of colours merging into one another, soft, pleasing, an outline here and there. A black crack runs across the ceiling, the ironing board leans against the linen cupboard, his leather slippers lie beside it. Several times now he has thought he could hear his sleeping wife's voice, clear as a bell, starting to talk about something.

Vincent is quite used to her conversations. At the end of their honeymoon, in a hotel somewhere surrounded by brownish-red mountain ridges, she had surprised him one night. Sleeping dreamlessly, he had suddenly heard a question being asked, close to his ear.

'Is that so?'

Clearly, loudly. Vincent turned his head and could feel her breath. 'Yes,' he said, just for fun to that delightful young woman, his wife, who, less than six inches away, was obviously experiencing something about which she wanted to know more.

'Aren't there lots of them then by now?' (She.)

'Yes, hundreds,' he replied, amused, and yawned, his sleep welling up again. The day, which they had spent in a village devastated by an earthquake, was long over and done with. Over and done with, too, the little alleyways with the crumbling walls, the birds in the ivy, a lame dog. And Noor, a few steps ahead of him, had turned round to him in the blazing afternoon sun and frowned: 'What are you looking at?'

7

What? What was he looking at? She was wearing a revealing dress and, to protect her delicate skin, had smoothed on a thin layer of cream. He had been looking, now that she asked, at the upward-slanting corners of her sunglasses that hid her expression like a cat mask.

About a quarter of an hour later, in a roadside café where they drank a beer at the bar, she was curious to know what he was thinking.

‘Right this minute?’

Not knowing an answer at first, Vincent screwed up his eyes, then watched as an advertising balloon emerged from between the mountains and rose so high above a mustard field in garish yellow bloom that it turned as transparent as a jellyfish in the blue sea, and replied in all honesty: ‘About the Montgolfier brothers.’

She nodded and followed his glance. Noor was an eager and inquisitive young woman who had always been interested in anything that happened to cross her path. Some things she would grow tired of, others not at all.

When they were driving home two days later, it amused her to turn the conversation to their youthful love affairs. It was evening, and Vincent had been staring through the windscreen for nearly ten hours without a break. Weary though he was, he unhesitatingly told Noor, though it might have been out of tiredness, about the fourteen-year old girl who had rung the animal ambulance one afternoon. A pigeon on a balcony had got its head stuck in a crack in the wooden floor. It had been trying to get at a grain of corn, but just look what had happened! The girl had run on in front of him to the confined space. And the eighteen-year old student, who earned a little extra helping out on the animal ambulance twice a week, had looked with some astonishment at the feathered body, breathing without a head. Then he had quickly pushed both hands against the sides of the wooden planking, the bloody neck had popped out and everything was right as rain again. In a week’s time, he had said on the spur of the moment, I’ll come round again just to....

He fell silent.

‘What’s the matter?’ asked Noor.

They had passed Cologne, and Vincent had suddenly slowed down. On the hard shoulder he had seen a man in the darkness, holding up his arm. Noor had thought it absolutely priceless that they had taken that pig of a man, snoring heavily, as far as Arnhem, where he had left the car without saying a word.

There is no doubt that domestic life suited Vincent. And why should he not put up with some of the petty, inevitable, irritations? One day he came home from work at about six o'clock. As soon as he opened the back door he remembered that he and Noor were to spend the evening with friends. Downstairs there was hardly any light, but in the living room was a distinct glow from the garden: it had snowed for the first time that day. Noor was getting dressed upstairs. When he came into the room, she straightened up a little, her foot on a chair, white, half naked.

'How was your day? Did you get caught in the traffic?'

Because she was standing with her back to the light, he was unable to make out her expression.

It was already late and he walked past, and when he turned on the shower, it seemed to him that her questions, unanswered, had quietly followed him into the bathroom. This feeling continued all evening. The small talk so customary between married couples was submerged, during the successful dinner party, in other things. There had been another accident on the Old Sea Road, his friends reported. Yes, a serious one, probably taken by surprise when it started snowing. You know Passchier's driveway, with that silo about ten yards further on? The car had skidded and gone right through the concrete, still at full speed. The driver was killed instantly.

How awful. Vincent looked from the host and his companion to Noor, her sweet face shocked. And at that moment her questions rose up again in his mind. Simple, routine, were still there.

'Everything all right?' she asked on the way home.

'I'm fine.'

'Then why are you so quiet?'

'Because of you.'

‘Vincent, what do you mean?’

‘Only that I’m really looking forward to another drink back home.’

Could it be that the woman you love might, with a few questions posed in the most mundane language, be revealing the theme song of her life, in which you - why do you recoil? - are the leitmotif?

5

A woman’s handwriting. One who keeps her entries short. Lying in bed, he holds up the pages in the lamplight. He reads that, on 22 April, she must not forget somebody, a certain *Taco*. The rest of the room is now a velvety shadow which allows the nocturnal, outside world through, but not unfiltered. A few days later, at about 3.30 p.m., she will turn her attention to ‘red tiles for the balcony (375 guilders)’. He looks drowsily at the reminders which, as the year advances, become increasingly few and far between. Each one of them seems to him to have a very deep, if elusive, significance. Not yet taken place, but undoubtedly coming. Named, in a certain sense already described, but for the rest, as intangible as episodes in a dream. Through the fanlight (to the right of the bed, where his wife sleeps), the scent of the hyacinths that stand in bloom in countless rows outside the village reaches him. An optician, a hairdresser, the names of sundry people and shops. The items that are beyond his ken are related to one another as on a terrestrial or celestial map. Including the one coordinate, closer, brighter but truly no more comprehensible than the rest: with extreme curiosity, Vincent Lucas stares at his own name for a long time. Then he turns off the light. A deep sigh. On 7 May at 9.30 a.m. she will be sitting on the stained wooden bench downstairs waiting to see him, a dog at her feet, or a cat on her lap. Or either one might also be a bird.

He is almost asleep when next to him, with no reference to anything else, a fragment of some random conversation begins.

‘Do you know who?’

Noor.

‘Do you know who it is?’

For one hundredth of a second, he is aware of her voice. She is reading my mind, he even thinks. Then, as usual, he murmurs something friendly and, completely at peace with himself, dozes off until the following morning at seven o’clock when he reaches out a hand to smother the alarm.

6

The breakfast table in the kitchen is covered with a checked tablecloth. He is reading the paper. Now and then he looks at Noor’s face, but says nothing. Noor is in her dressing gown; she only gets dressed early on those days when she helps out in the practice. Smooth complexion, for a long time now, sleep has been doing her good. ‘Why are you laughing?’ she asks her husband. She opens a drawer, rummages about in it, and strikes a match. For a long time now her clumsy gestures, her strained desperation, have been almost imperceptible. ‘I’m laughing at something in the paper,’ he says with a glance at the front page where, down at the bottom left, two choice columns are published every day.

Noor pours boiling water into the teapot, cools a couple of boiled eggs under the tap and places a bowl of muesli on the table for Sonia, the schoolgirl, who has just set a kitten down on the tiles. The animal, only eight weeks old, was accidentally left behind at the practice, where new-born kittens are never fatally injected, because there is absolutely no need for it. There are plenty of people who are quite happy to have one of these wonderfully soft little companions. This one, small as it is, already has its proper grey stripes, and is chasing a wad of paper, skidding on its paws. The threesome in the kitchen can’t help laughing.

Sonia, though, seems preoccupied. Her smile, which has something fretful about it, seems to say, I have more important things on my mind; apart from a kitten, I also have to think about the emails from Simon, a Belgian officer on a chemical tanker making for either Spitsbergen or the Senegal coast, he doesn’t know which yet. The child been sending him email messages and chatting to him for days now. This very morning she went running to the computer in the waiting

room, since the practice is closed today. With the kitten on her arm clawing at her typing fingers, she opened the mailbox. She had asked him what he meant by ‘the bridge’. The bridge of the ship, he had written back, of ‘the Atlantika, have you heard of it?’ He is twenty-one. Those twenty-one years cause her a bit of a flutter, the ‘executive duties on board’ to which he refers now and then elicit suppressed giggles, and his set opening to every chat - *Memoirs from the Ocean...* - evokes her immense interest.)

Time to go. Vincent folds the paper and stands up. Tapping his coat pockets he walks to the coat rack in the hall. Have I got everything? Yes, he does: in addition to his papers and keys, he is carrying an insignificant pocket notebook, something that, without his realizing it, has been filling him with an unsettling feeling of foreboding. Ah, there it is. His fingers recognize the outline; after all, he had to put it somewhere. Taking his coat from the hook, he pictures the spiky handwriting. In an hour’s time he will be making his first incision in a shaven grey skin. He stretches out an arm, looks at the time. At ease with his life, and completely focused on the patients he will be dealing with that day, he thinks with pleasure of the woman whose face he doesn’t know. Her name? On the threshold of the back door, just as he is about to say goodbye, it occurs to him that her name must be in the records that are kept here at home. And the appointment book is bound to have her address.

Noor is bent over the radio. She turns a knob and up comes the weather report, followed by the traffic news. She looks up. Offers him her lips.

‘When will you be back? Drive carefully, won’t you?’

What person does not welcome an element of concern from another?

With goodbyes and promises, he steps out into the open air. Close by the doorstep he sees a child playing with a kitten in just the same way that every child plays with a kitten; watching it, he relishes the moment. The kitten’s wilfulness is impressive, its innocence touches your soul: oh, that furry little menace that had shot up the curtain like lightning, overreaches itself and falls to the floor. When you picked it up, you could feel the warmth and the small thudding in your hand. Oh yes, it is tantalizingly soft and frail, and its physical strength is negligible. Yet

apparently, this in no way detracts from its ability to produce the appropriate response. When you knock something over with a crash (such as the broom on the floor), it will instantly arch its back most convincingly, and should you accidentally step on its tail, it will hiss hideously. You melt. You are overcome with affection. By continuing to look at it, stroke it and tease it, you can draw near to this miraculous fellow creature, this scrap of existence that, as if it were the most normal thing in the world, possesses a pair of small, transparent, swivelling ears, a guileless little nose and tender furry paws.

‘Right,’ says Vincent later that morning, ‘put in a catheter.’

On the table lies a greyhound. Its front legs are sticking straight out from under the green sheet, above is the head, the eyes half-open. Through the open mouth, an oxygen tube runs into the throat.

7

The greyhound belongs to the clinic. It knows the smell of antiseptics and is familiar with the gleaming tiles. The students who do their practicals here like to start on an animal that likes having its pulse felt and has no objection at all when an otoscope is inserted deep into its auditory canal. All these prospective vets had started out as animal lovers in their youth, as had their lecturer, the veterinary surgeon who, this very morning, had carefully exposed the dorsal vertebrae of the eleven-year old patient. The animal, which was finding it increasingly difficult to walk, is about to have a hernia operation.

‘Give it some more,’ says Vincent to the anaesthetist when the dog’s muscles begin to jerk.

‘The file.’ He holds out his hand for the delicate electrical instrument.

In no other branch of medicine does the work of the practitioner vary so widely. The vet is both an internist and an orthopaedic surgeon; even a retinal transplant is not unusual. This morning all three operating theatres are being used. They are arranged as equilateral structures separated by glass walls and, together, form an image reminiscent of the mirrored reflections in a kaleidoscope. Under

bright lights three groups clad in green are engaged in a painstaking job. Small gestures, few words. Their threefold manoeuvre, identical except for a shift in location, is governed by the anaesthetic apparatus at the head of the table and the scalpels and scissors at the foot, or more correctly, at the tail end of the table. The thing that lies breathing, almost out of sight under the green cloth, is not without importance either.

The needle. Vincent looks up at one of the assistants; after three hours the greyhound's body is being sewn up again. 'O.K.,' he says cheerfully, when nothing but a watery red line is left in the skin. 'Is number two ready? Give me twenty minutes, then bring it in.'

He walks up to the wall with the X-rays, stretches his back, feels a pleasant sensation of hunger and thirst, remembers the small diary in his inside pocket, thinks about it, for a moment and then directs his attention to the photograph with the vague outlines of four little bulldogs which, because of their abnormally large heads, will have to be delivered shortly by Caesarean section. There was a time when he would tell Noor at length about this sort of gratifying operation. How the young assistants rubbed the puppies dry, how they kept them warm. Can't you just see it?

Well, she certainly could. A brief smile, then, gently, she would push away the empty plate to one side. To please her he would tell her over supper, in the greatest possible detail, and in the most technical terms, what he had achieved that day. Noor, all ears, would receive an account of the incisions and cross incisions. She would also learn that the anaesthetic had consisted of so many percent of opiates and so many percent of oxygen. After all, isn't every form of living together based on a simple but often hidden code? Noor had been a good-looking young woman then, with the jaw line of a finely drawn gourd. There was not a trace around her eyes, nose and mouth of worry or grief, which, in the long run, as we all know, move from your thoughts to your features.