

A pleasant, poetic immediacy

The poetry of Maria Barnas

WHEN *TWEE ZONNEN* (Two Suns, 2003) was awarded the C. Buddingh' Prize, the jury considered it 'contemplative, musical poetry, desperate and humorous, powerful and brittle, with a transparency that gets more complex on re-reading'. Although similar words could be used to generally describe Maria Barnas's second collection, *Er staat een stad op* (A City Rises, 2007), the poet's style has clearly evolved: Barnas loosens her grip on syntax and widens her focus. Meanwhile, sharp observations seem to overrule contemplation, and a light, slightly frightening sense of violence enters her poems now and again. Her craftsmanship, which critics praised in *Twee zonnen*, is still there, but it's put to use in a more nonchalant manner.

Barnas still combines her various artistic trades, and added writing poetry reviews, a libretto and plays for theatre and radio to the list, but writing poetry is at the centre of her activities. As she once told a reporter of the Dutch daily *Trouw*, she always needs to find a solution for something in a poem first, before she can start thinking about it in any other form. Her distinctive characteristic is that she displays control in all the disciplines she engages in. She sets about things in a self-assured, sophisticated way.

In her poetry, her language is just as sharp as her observations. Her work is also characterised by a subtle sense of humour: she meets a 'tall poet with, on his arm,/ the lovely girlfriend and, loosely, the park'; maudlin metaphors are hanging from the bough like dead swans. And her work has a pleasant, poetic immediacy: when she describes the Amstel river and 'the front of the city', she suddenly briskly continues 'but/ everything that I say exists.' She is not afraid to link her poems to topical issues, such as a newspaper report or bomb attacks in London. Despite their clarity, her poems can have a disorientating effect. Associations occasionally lead the reader away from the described situation. The perspective in her poems regularly capsizes and changes. Each time we fall down, a city rises.



photo Marijke Aerden

Before she published her first collection of poetry, *Twee zonnen* (Two Suns, 2003), Maria Barnas (b. 1973) had already written two novels and established herself as a visual artist. *Twee zonnen* was awarded the C. Buddingh' Prize, one of Holland's most important debut prizes, and followed by her highly appraised second collection *Er staat een stad op* (A City Rises) in 2007.

Maria Barnas definitely knows the tools and how to use them.
ARIE VAN DEN BERG in *NRC HANDELSBLAD*

She doesn't allow us to briefly go back home or get back to reality. We must keep on walking through the wonderland of her metaphors.

ERIK LINDNER in *DE GROENE AMSTERDAMMER*

In Barnas's work, nothing is just what it seems.
EDWIN FAGEL in online magazine *DE RECENSENT*

CONTEMPORARY DUTCH POETS

This brochure is part of the *Contemporary Dutch Poets*-series, featuring a choice of today's most interesting poets from the Netherlands. The series is published by the Foundation of Production and Translation of Dutch Literature. If you would like to receive more information or other brochures from this series, please contact Thomas Möhlmann (t.moehlmann@nlpvf.nl).

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BARNAS ABROAD

Poems by Maria Barnas have been translated and published in anthologies and magazines in Portugal, Slovenia, South-Africa, Spain, Switzerland and the UK.



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Sample Translation

Poems

by Maria Barnas

(Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers)

Translated by Donald Gardner, except 'The scythe'
translated by Antony Dunn

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Twee zonnen

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2003: Dutch original from *Twee zonnen*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 2003

2006: From *By Heart – Uit het Hoofd*. Five Leaves, Nottingham 2006

2007: Dutch original from *Er staat een stad op*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 2007

Followed by ‘I want a sentence to become unseated’: an interview with Maria Barnas

For additional information on Maria Barnas and other Dutch poets, please also visit:

- The poetry pages at the NLPVF website:

<http://www.nlpvf.nl/p/>

- The Dutch domain of Poetry International Web:

<http://netherlands.poetryinternationalweb.org>

TWEE ZONNEN

Wanneer ik ga slapen ligt de zee nog steeds beneden
en altijd is de zon me voor.

Ik sta bij een uitsnede
van donker water en later ben ik bij de boten

met zeilen wit zo licht als opgeluchte stemmen
en tussen de schaterende meeuwen wel eens opgetogen.

Maar in de ring die ik kreeg sta ik scheef
naast een datum. En ik zie hem in de verte
gaan, met een zon. Slordig herhaald in het raam.

Hij noemde me Bloem. ook wel Lente, Sexy, Liefste,
Liefde Lief en de laatste tijd steeds vaker
Lieverniet, Neelater, Alsjeblieft.

TWO SUNS

When I fall asleep the sea is still below
and the sun as always before me.

I am standing next to a detail of dark water
and later on I'll be by the boats,

their white sails light as voices sighing with relief,
and sometimes ecstatic between the chattering gulls.

But in the ring I was given I am set slanted
next to a date. And I see him disappear in the distance,
with a sun. Sloppily repeated in the window.

He called me Flower. Or else Springtime, Sexy, Sweetest,
Sweetie, Sweet and recently more often
Prefernot, Notnow, Please.

MEN

I think of the man I loved
Do I love him?
How many fears does that make?

Our plates became emptier
and on the edge a flower, cut
from a radish. A small exuberant life.

Not meant to eat, he knows.

pianissimo très doux et très expressif

Flames are raging round a tower.
A black angel with a suitcase jumps
from a window on the 37th floor. What's he taking with him?

I play *Rêverie* on the piano. *pp très doux et très expressif*. But how am I supposed to.
I turn off the sound on the telly.

The black angel jumps to his death once again
and I need a reason to live I really believe in.
But you'd see it too if you were to close my eyes:
It is dark inside my mind.

There is a tower collapsing here
and everything is gentle and expressive
as an eyelash blown from a fingertip.

A TABLE OF POSSIBILITIES

I took the table to work on.
The legs came off easily and the top isn't heavy
but now I'm sitting at the window on the wrong side
of this house, the city escapes me. A face
I don't remember the name of.

Maybe I oughtn't to listen to a requiem
in the morning but if I don't I hear girls
giggling. You never know when they'll start.
Can't the singer make a single mistake just for once? Like me

with a tall man in a low house on the water.
We went swimming. We were happy once in a while
but one day I became frightened of the table.

It made no difference if I left.
It would still be there anyway.

He shows the new wife the little sun
on the thermostat to be switched off at night.

Does she know she's sleeping between my sheets?
That the bed is mine and that I'm going to come
and collect the chairs and the wicked sea.

SEA OF BEADS

The town turned round
when I looked back. Excuse me please
I thought you were someone else.

I've got a good swearword
a mean bead on my tongue.

I cut a striped heart out of paper.
Don't I dare that I need you?

The world is tired and on the blue lines
of an exercise book it's cold.

First a man still slept here.
Now the body rises.
I'm reduced to silence.

ERBARME DICH

An Englishman with gorgeous eyes is tuning my piano.
I'm going to do it very carefully, he says.
droplets and leaves are spilling from the elderberry bush
in the corner of the garden, sir, like words from my mouth.
Would you mind?
I think the tree is incurably ill.
We might have a slight problem here.
We.

A humid summer has dawned in my mind
dear sir, a paralysing heat. Do you have any suggestions?
I don't know what 'scorching' is in English.
Would you like a drink?
Thank you so much.
How much?

In Brussels I ate chocolate made of gold foil
and I wore an impeccable hat.
In Paris I rode in a Ferris wheel.
I could go with you to London just like that.

If I have sugar. And milk.
The Englishman plays.
Erbarme dich.

That's that and that's all.
Thank you so much.

THE SCYTHER

The flatlands inhale. Roots scrat for a grasp
on thin air, a gasp against the window.
A train drags all the landscape in its wake.

A field is skinned like elastoplast from skin,
and all its boundaries are undone,
and in the pocket at his breast a scythe.

Bushes are turned out, the quickening grass
at the verge is frisked. Clouds lump a trembling sky
in his windpipe. And all the bends shriek.

But it's not down to the hills that there is
this, nor to the charging lake, that there is
this drubbing of blood behind the temples.

The Scythe scores this out: *I have lost the notes
and what will I do to make them out
in a land deaf as stones to itself?*

He balls up the shade-barred Eden printed
on his bag; his fingers bleed a black bloom.
And all and every leaf a sharp demand.

CONTINUITY

The girl ascends the staircase. The girl ascends the staircase with steps
that jostle into a curve at the top. She keeps on walking

despite the fact that she can't change anything.

We get a glimpse of her forehead, pale skin
her hair parallel to the steps.

She looks straight ahead while ascending the staircase.

There's a girl ascending the staircase!
It could be a wig the way that hair's hanging.

She holds a parcel tightly under her arm.

There's a parcel going up the staircase the steps
a door on the stairs on the steps the ankles the girl.

She doesn't change now her toes have reached the winding steps

a fan over her head a door swings out of the dark
out of the silence in her a curve is wrung steps shoulder-high.

A girl is ascending the staircase with a reason.

THE SPACE YOU OCCUPY

The rocks will have to turn carefully into deer
on the ridge of the hill. Ragged and blacker every night.

The sheep run as a white stain a hand wipes a piece of peel
from the table no from the grey

meadow. Must have been startled by the huge irresolute
creatures. How the hill in the water –

My mother moves as a memory
moves as my mother in the uncertain garden.

Not true: she rinses out a room of glass.
I have her questions:

are you ever woken up with a start without any age
by memories that drip on your forehead
till they become facts. They fit

your name incontrovertibly a street a number and a country
to write on the back of an envelope.

That you are a woman and what that means no you
as you blow-dry the morning and puff a lock

of the past from our forehead with a sigh. You comb knots
from my hair. Don't move. We are so like each other.

Where were we? There
they are on the right. No those are stones.

IT IS RAINING ON THE FREDERIKSPLEIN

She is standing on the edge of what is just about
to happen and the surrounding trees grow rigid

straight up. She folds up promises to others
and spits two words into the unyielding

white water. A dog jumps
over the edge as it begins

to rain in the fountain.
Love had to do with it

but it is only the language that is inclined.
And inclines.

Fountains make similar gestures
and the dog will shake itself out of its coat

if things go on like this. She is not sure about her hand
and where her words touch the water

two dogs begin to dawn.
One without a coat the other without a heart.

THE HANDS OF THE CLOCK IN HIROSHIMA

They stand on the tower to watch
a horse being dragged to the water.

Where do you bury the dead? They point at the creature
and later they shake it from their fingertips.

Sixty years ago they stopped moving.

The photo the explosion made wiped out everything
except the shadows of those who kept staring.

We have gained a city.
Everything is gleaming and dust-proof.

We have stared at the hands on the tower.
They didn't blink.

We have shaken the bells.
We asked the man who sets them right who

was this done by. Who has done this.

The horse leads history.
They say it has pranced since it refused to shrink.

TOO LATE

I was cycling across a lull in the city
that turned slowly into houses where people live together
when loneliness jumped on the pillion

and said I'll ride with you a bit I'm going that way anyway
It's not convenient I said. I have to find a beginning
for a letter. Goodbye.

I peeled a red apple and saw the pale
meat looking so withdrawn on its plate
I couldn't eat it. Imagined the woman

you chose instead of me and devised another
country I could live in.

Loneliness had tried out all the chairs

and was just lying down in bed when you called.

You looked so weary I felt free to invite you in.

But you had lots of baggage. Suitcases full

of nimble words too heavy to carry.

The man speaks. Why won't you let me in

is there someone else in there?

No I lie. I'm on my own. I count how many
lies a person can come across in a doorway
and get the impression something's missing.

MASS

We are the oarsmen with dew on our faces
who row into the morning without a sound.
We are the ones whom newspapers proclaim,
whom statistics speak of, who are in the frame.
We are the risk that you spread.
We've found each other and we'll only be quiet
when we know for heaven's sake why we're here.

Do you perhaps have anything to do with it? Are you the one
who undermines us; makes us pine away in a sea of randomness
because there are so many of us: our wailing
will never be so loud as the scream of a woman
whose hands burn on the tram rails.
There she is. She is screaming as a woman
screams whose hands are burning.

The louder we make ourselves heard the more we
destroy ourselves and later we're the incomplete ravens
of ink in the palm of your hand that you shake
as if it were a stranger's in the last light.
Where are they going the oarsmen move
unnaturally backwards they beat the oars
wide as the water and retreat along the land.

A CITY RISES

Into the city from the top storey.
The streets of Buenos Aires are roaring below.

The city where everything turns out right.

They take you along in right-
angles. But shadows are blowing here

and pebblestone buildings
swirl. There is one

with a heart of grazed red stone.

And so as not to see a heart pouring itself out
you go downstairs. Hang onto your shadow.

The red hem round your neck opens out
into a red river. Think waterfall.

Waterfalls.

A piano lid slams a house shut.
Swipes a building against the wall.

In the lift you stumble over the threshold from a certain house.
A ceiling of stars ascends.

Twenty storeys plunge. Full length.
A city rises.

JUST TO MAKE SURE

July 8, 2005 London

*London struggled back Friday after bombings. Much of London was eerily quiet.
Bombed stations were shrouded in security curtains, and refrigerated trucks waited
outside to cart away bodies.*

The streets are stirring all the same. Interrupt me.

Although we wormed our way out of the city along the Thames
in tremendous curves we were prepared for everything.

Feel free to leaf through the storeys, fold a dog-ear
in the shaft of a lift. Make thick leaden drops out of metal
and plunge in nosedives. Pitfalls.

Capital letters hardly keep up with the bombs.
Mistake me.

They are sitting like sandwiches in Tesco carrier bags
where I – here we go.

We were ready for it we were prepared for everything
and we stayed eerily quiet.

We had planned the pits well before
and meticulously scraped ruins of streets and houses
out of stone. Sliced a shell out of square just to make sure
and hacked stairs out of underground steps in the opposite direction.

Someone doubted it but when the time came it began.

The bombs landed in their place.

MAUDLIN METAPHORS ARE HANGING FROM THE BOUGH LIKE
DEAD SWANS

There is a life that withdraws from the subject at
dinner and slowly grows inwardly

and although my voice box reiterates a laryngal
it gets snared in itself (that bird-black

that colours your thoughts of a tree
a flock that cannot think of a better place)

won't listen because everything recalls
would you like white and points towards or red

but my fear that it isn't a flock at all
is greater than my dread of death yes red please.

Game soup is served.

Can someone chase away these lonesome swans?
They cut figures of eight in the waterway.

Then I will let the night tree take root in me
and sway. Seek images for serene.

I spill birds on the tablecloth.

An interview with Maria Barnas

“I want a sentence to become unseated”

by Arjen van Veelen

(2007, Awater)

translated by George Hall

In her second collection *Er staat een stad op* (A City Rises), Maria Barnas allows more leeway for waywardness. Four of the 5885 words do not exist in the Dutch language: ‘Spuuglikken (‘spitlick’) ... there was no other choice.’

The poet is relaxing at an open-air café along the Amstel River in Amsterdam. She drinks mint tea and gives an interview, circumspectly but in good spirits. A bird releases something from above, and this strikes the interviewer’s shirt. ‘Oh shit!’ Maria Barnas exclaims. A moment later, when a napkin has been fetched: ‘Bird shit dropped on my previous book when I was sitting outside talking to my editor about it. Then my mother said: “Just wait and see, you’re bound to win a prize now!”.’ Six months later, her book *Twee zonnen* (Two Suns) won the C. Buddingh’ Prize for 2004. ‘Overwhelming,’ was the comment of the jury, and praised the clarity ‘that gets more complex on re-reading’.

Barnas writes poetry, publishes novels and produces visual art. She writes about poetry and art for the *Groene Amsterdammer* magazine and the *Volkskrant* daily newspaper. She would find it agreeable, she had e-mailed when the appointment was made, to base the interview on specific poems ‘rather than on poetry in general’. That became the point of departure.

But what’s wrong with talking about poetry in general? ‘It’s easy to generate all kinds of theories about poetry,’ says Barnas now. She prefers to talk about a concrete poem. ‘I find it important to be precise.’

She is referring to poetry at large and also to her own poetry. ‘I want poetry to touch upon tangible reality. And that’s difficult enough. As soon as you try to describe something precisely, it automatically acquires ambiguous offshoots of significance. I play with these, with the fact that these offshoots generate something, reinforce one another, undermine one another. I find the world incomprehensible enough. It is not particularly admirable to say: “I simply do something.”’

‘There goes my child,’ she points out a moment later. Her partner is strolling along the Amstel with their one-month-old son in the buggy. She has hardly written anything about this, about the birth. ‘Maybe that’ll come later. It’s all too

predominant at the moment. I read many more poems about children nowadays. Just as you suddenly see a lot more baby carriages.'

As a child of six years old, Barnas (Hoorn, 1973) moved with her parents to England, where her father taught Dutch at an international school. 'I anticipated an instantly recognizable island, one that you could easily walk around, with palm trees and a blue sea. But it was even duller than Holland.'

That emigration accelerated her awareness of language. She remembers the first time that she spoke the magic words 'Can I play?'

'From that moment onwards, I was superconscious of words.' And when she returned to the Netherlands as a thirteen-year-old adolescent, she spoke a rather formal kind of Dutch. 'The language of books. I couldn't indulge in normal conversation because I lacked the essential phrases and connecting words. I was stunned when I heard people say things like "te gek" (fab) and "doei" (seeya).' She has a built-in difficulty with the 'one-dimensionality' of speaking. 'A conversation partner expects a certain straightforwardness. But it's not always quite so consistent in your head. There, you can speak to somebody while simultaneously wishing that you were home alone. I can represent and experience situations more completely on paper, with all their apparent contradictions. Barnas studied English, but left this language study to go to the Rietveld Academy of Art: she wanted to become a painter. She had a difficult time there. The teachers knew exactly how things should be done. 'For not one moment did I think: now I'm on the right track.' She abandoned painting and discovered video art and installations. And language.

Language is the primal mother of her visual art. She uses it to wrong-foot her viewers and arouse doubt about what they are looking at. Take her work for the Wibauthuis, for example. This was once proclaimed the ugliest building in Amsterdam. Barnas interviewed the almost ninety-year-old architect, Norbert Gawronski, about his brainchild. The resulting film was shown in the building. The words of the architect manipulate the *prima facie* ugliness of the building. Or take the art connoisseur who told her how one can recognize a genuine Lucebert drawing. The sound track was played next to three of his drawings in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. Visitors hear the connoisseur and can view the drawings. And they begin to doubt. Is that line there really irregular? Barnas publishes her poems not only on paper. For example, snippets of her poetry adorn 103 drain covers in a park. A medium such as cast iron makes other demands on an artist. 'Now and again, a poem simply doesn't fit onto a sheet of paper. You know that the reader will go through the poem from top to bottom, and perhaps once again. But with drain covers, you never know from which side the reader is going to enter the park. And there are no paragraphs. Every line has to be a possible beginning. And an end, because you have to take into consideration that someone may just turn around and will thus see only one drain cover.'

Or take her prose poem that can only be obtained in a mental institution in

Hoofddorp. The poet walked with a memo recorder in a straight line from the institution to the sea in eight hours. She processed the memos into poetry and ‘brought them back to the building’ as wall texts and as a book that can be obtained there free of charge. ‘Some people – not all – are not allowed out of the institution. You may consider that cruel. But most residents never look at that book. They are busy with other things, with their addiction or with handling their psychosis, for instance. Vice versa, anyone who wishes to read it must go to that building and experience that oppressive atmosphere. That is something that you can feel in the visual arts but is very difficult in literature.’

During the Fashion Biennial in June, one of Barnas’s poems hung in the Weverstraat, a shopping promenade in Arnhem. It could be read from two directions, taking into account the approach routes of the shopping public. ‘The poem has the structure of two people who wish to allow the other person to go first but who get tangled up as a result. It is a clumsy dance, a kind of elegant impasse.’

On paper, too, Barnas seeks scope in movement. ‘It all has to happen in the language itself. There is a lot of movement in my poetry, everything is continually in a process of slipping a little. A poem has to be able to maintain a kind of intrinsic momentum. Perhaps that has something to do with the fact that I may occasionally even feel anxious in a poem. Language has to take over. I want a sentence to become unseated as a consequence of the following words. Or that you read something and at the end of it you think “but is that really true?” And then it turns out that the poem gives no conclusive answer. Only when that aim has been reasonably successful can I leave it as it is and put a title above it.’

A hot-air balloon that appears to have two shadows adorns the cover of her new collection *Er staat een stad op*. It is a reference to the title and the cover of her debut. On the jacket of *Twee zonnen* we see a woman at a ditch, hanging above the water like Narcissus, but she goes deeper and dips her head in the duckweed. If you look closely, you can see that the duckweed is illuminated by two spotlights.

Her new collection is completely different, she says. Not only were the 49 poems written in a much shorter time (her first collection covered ten years’ work), but she also felt free to express herself more.

That is demonstrated when the cuttings folder is opened. Barnas once said in an interview: ‘What irritates me, is that poets start to make up words.’ But in this collection, she herself uses words under which Word would draw a red line. Knokkelwaarts (knuckleways). Bloembloed (flowerblood). Vlugvluchtig (fastflightly).

Laughing: ‘So, they don’t exist?’ And then: ‘I have changed in that respect, I think. I used to be extremely allergic to this kind of thing and I still believe that there is a big difference between thinking up words purely for the sake of creating them and propelling a kind of bizarreness into the world, and thinking them up because there is no better word for what you want to say. I now tolerate things that are no longer completely under control. There is even a fourth contrived

word in the collection.’

Sometimes a poem simply demands it, as is the case with ‘spuuglikken’ (spitlick), the fourth invented word. She uses it in a poem in which the image is rewound. Visitors ‘spuuglikken koffie in kopjes’ (spitlick coffee into cups). Barnas: ‘Drinking something backwards in time, I had to think up something for that. You can’t have them spit, that is too undisciplined. There was no other choice.’

The title of her new collection seems to refer to a resurrection, whereas the first was about farewell and decline. Is that true? ‘No, it’s not,’ says Barnas. She explains it with reference to the title poem itself, a poem that also clearly indicates how she uses movement.

The poem is set in Buenos Aires, the Paris of Latin America, the city ‘where everything turns out fine’. The main character stumbles in the lift and falls. And falls double: the lift also descends. The last lines run: ‘Zo storten twintig verdiepingen. Languit./ Er staat een stad op.’ (Twenty storeys plunge. Full length./ A city rises.’ Barnas: ‘It is only with respect to the person who loses his or her balance that a city arises. Thus only in that field of tension of the poem. That idea of “The city where everything turns out fine” is rather dubious.’ Mutuality, the ‘with-regard-to-one-anotherness’, as she calls it, is important in her work. Take the poem ‘Je bent geweldig’ (You are marvellous) for example. In this poem somebody becomes small because he or she takes a few steps backward:

Je bent maar drieëndertig en als je een stap
vooruit maar achttien zeventien richting
de deur nog maar elf centimeter geweldig.

(You are only thirty-three and if you take
a step forward only eighteen seventeen toward
the door only eleven centimetres marvellous.)

The collection *Er staat een stad op* opens with a hard-handed poem. A radio message sounds. Concrete yet vague at the same time: dead woman found in Amsterdam. How does a woman get into this situation? Barnas begins on a hesitant reconstruction in which she sets down the dying woman against a kerbstone, looking for a word, k...k...

That hesitant version suddenly becoming tiresome, Barnas switches to the imperative:

Ga liggen op het asfalt je hoofd net niet
tegen de stoeprand aan. Ram een schip tegen de kade
maak twee gelijke barsten in een schedel

tot de tegels helder kraken.

Rakelings het plein
waar ruimte om je oren waait als bij vlinderslag
in vlagen van paniek. Neem een K voor in je mond.

Een stokkende kade om aan te staan.

(Go lie down on the asphalt your head just
away from the kerbstone. Ram a ship against the quay
make two cracks in your skull

until the paving stones burst brightly

Skimming the square
where space blows around your ears as with a butterfly stroke
in surges of panic. Try to say a K.

A heaving quay to stand at.)

How did you read “butterfly stroke”?’ she asks. ‘I was just talking to my editor about it. Not with reference to swimming? Funny, she didn’t either, she thought about butterflies. But for me it’s all about that impossible swinging of your arms.’

The police message with which the poem begins is sham-concrete. ‘We know what is going on, but actually we know nothing at all.’ That false certainty appears in many of Barnas’s poems. You also encounter it in the quasi-reassuring messages about the bomb attacks in London. But also in the way in which people dress and furnish their houses. ‘It is a matter of creating a buffer against the things you can’t control. And that is a hopeless task. You get a good picture of this in Do-It-Yourself stores. You can see what people buy in order to obtain some kind of temporary foothold in their personal lives. Just as in that one-page story by David Eggers, from *How We Are Hungry*, about a man who had to have three walls of a garden house built before his wife came home. He invests his entire heart and soul, because this is a way of proving that he really is capable of realizing something.’

In many of her poems, Barnas is engaged in reconstructing events and corroborating diaries. For example, that rear mirror shines in ‘Momentopname’ (Snapshot in time).

Ik schrijf de datum en de tijd op van de dag en het moment
waarop ik de datum en de tijd van de dag en het tijdstip
waarop ik de dag en het tijdstip noteer.

(I write down the date and time of the day and the moment
at which I write down the date and the time of the day and the moment
at which I record the day and the moment.)

Then the boiler wheezes into action. In the poem, that sound launches recollections of a man.

Barnas has kept a diary for many years. 'I think that it's more than merely holding on to what would otherwise have been lost. By keeping things, you give yourself a second chance to comprehend what is happening. I think I am very poor in understanding what's going on at present.'

Does it help to keep objects, goods? 'No, never. They just accumulate. For example, I used to have a suitcase containing all the letters I ever received. I took it with me to every new home. I threw it away recently. It gives a great relief not having to carry all that ballast with you. And recently I looked at the cupboards in my studio with all my visual art and I realized that that too is a form of dragging the past around with you. Even if I do believe that every time you make something new you should always ultimately organize a storage space for it. That is the good thing about a poem, it takes up so little space.'

Translated by George Hall

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