

## SAMPLE TRANSLATION



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*Urban Astronaut*

A quest for more space in our lives

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# URBAN ASTRONAUT

## A quest for more space in our lives

Marjolijn van Heemstra

De Correspondent, 2021

### 1 Longing for a vista

It's the hottest summer on record. Everything feels clammy: the sheets, my pillowcase, David's legs. My phone screen says 3:32 a.m., which means I've been lying awake for four and a half hours now. A new record. I listen to the fan whirring at top speed, a rhythmic *whoosh whoosh*. It does nothing to cool us down, but at least the air is moving, which does keep the relentless mosquitoes at bay. David, the man who has been my fiancé for years, shifts restlessly in his sleep. In the next room, our children lie sweating in their beds.

The bedroom window is open, as are all the windows on the square where we live. Everyone is hoping to catch some breeze in their stuffy apartment. The last night-owls have gone to bed, the first songbirds haven't yet awakened. It is that indeterminate time officially called morning, but which still feels like night. An in-between time, the pause between breaths.

I should get up, make use of this scarce moment of quiet. Answer e-mails, pay bills, write a poem. Instead, I surf through the stories on my Instagram account. Snippets of anger and indignation, alternating with blocks of self-promotion. Poetry and police brutality, rave reviews and ranting op-eds, recipes for vegan kebab followed by a takedown of patriarchy. I click hearts and thumbs-ups and share until my head spins from all the battles that need to be fought. We're only halfway, but 2019 has already been dubbed The Year of the Protest: school Climate Strikes, the yellow vests movement, demonstrations in Hong Kong, Sudan, America.

A message. An American activist I follow is going live. I click and watch: *We live in broken communities*, she says. And then I think of our traditional Amsterdam neighborhood where gentrification is running rampant. Coffee bars with their flat whites are elbowing out the Turkish teahouses, electric cargo bikes are displacing the noisy mobility cars. 'Goddamn yuppies and their real estate,' a neighbor lady grumbles every time a cargo bike rides by. 'Eh... we're also homeowners,' I say cautiously as we sit at the sandbox where her grandson and my son bang on a plastic bucket with little shovels. 'Whaddya know,' she says, and goes off to fetch us some instant coffee.

When she comes back, I shower her coffee with way too loud, high-pitched praise. Brown-noser. 'It's not just the yuppies. It's the Syrians, too,' another neighbor chimes in. His son can't find an affordable apartment, he says, because every place that comes free goes to the Syrians. Since then, I ask Mohammed, the Syrian with whom I practice Dutch every week, if we can meet somewhere other than at my house, so as not to stoke my neighbors' yuppie-refugee conspiracy theory.

I'm exhausted by my good intentions, by the depressing feeling that we're divided along hundreds of fault lines, whereby every act of goodwill or conciliation means a fight, every time anew, and when that neighbor sighs that the world is a f\*cked-up mess, I can only wholeheartedly agree with him.

3:42 a.m., my smartphone now informs me. I could swear it's been at least half an hour since I last looked. The Insta activist says we must make room for voices and stories we usually ignore because they make us uncomfortable. I want to ask her if she believes this applies across the board, if she's advocating radical free speech—all stories on the table means including the stories we can't stomach, that might even undermine our own principles. But before I've even finished tapping in my question, she has changed the subject.

I swipe through the stories again, click on a link to a video about ecocide in the Amazon. Every second, says the voice-over, two and a half acres of rainforest is cut down. I count to ten. Twenty-five acres. I try to calculate how many trees, plants, bushes, anthills, bird's nests, fungi, butterflies, and insects are now gone for good. I stop counting, but the seconds tick on. Worlds are being wiped out and I lie here in the dark with a feeling I can only describe as sinking.

Since the start of this heat wave, I sink to sleep at night in the blueish light of my screen. I pray for rain, for a puff of wind, for at least a respite from this heat, but on the national weather service site's forecast, nothing changes. Drought. Drought. Drought.

Our front yard faces due south. All day long the sun blasts its searing rays onto the plants and the flagstones. The trees on the square are too far away, their shadows do not reach us. The only thing that shoots up from the sidewalk in front of our house is the lamppost, whose dirty yellow light shines in past the edge of the curtains at night.

That light has annoyed me for as long as we've lived here. It's like sleeping in a spotlight. I squeeze my eyes shut, search for something in the darkness. A point of view—no, just a view. That's it: I need a view, a vista. I am unable to see past this sweltering night. As though the horizon has snuck up on me, has slowly transformed from a faraway pinstripe into a thick, ugly streak that blocks my view. It seems like the fan has gotten louder. *WHOOSH WHOOSH*. I've lost my view, lost the future, that's what it feels like, like when you lose the key to your bike lock. This can't be, it *mustn't* be: to have children, but no clear view of the future. What kind of hopeful stories can I tell them? A decent story needs continuity, and yet it's like everything's gradually become disjointed. Trees without a forest, birds without a flock, fish without a school, and mankind boxed in by the first impression. Which, in my case, means: white, left-wing, female, and a 'cargo-bike mom' even without the cargo bike. Where can we navigate to something or someone further than ourselves? More than what we seem at first sight?

Sometimes I'm afraid that we're so good at pointing out what divides us that there will soon be no words left to describe what connects us. Words die out, too, and with them a way of thinking. And yet: the fight against inequality starts with calling that inequality out, by identifying the differences. But how are we to combat overfishing, deforestation, and climate chaos if humanity is completely splintered?

4:10 a.m. Go to sleep, or at least quit brooding. There are hopeful stories, too. My desktop is full of them. I click on a video about people who live without plastic, wear trousers made of paper. It

doesn't help. I've been lugging those clear bags of plastic waste to the collection point next to the mosque for how long now? How many photos of those bags haven't I uploaded to the recycle platform so we can save up for a worm hotel? I don't even *want* a worm hotel.

'You've got to start somewhere' is my daily mantra. But all that starting usually means stopping with things. Stop eating meat, eating dairy, flying. My efforts feel so inadequate, like no more than a sequence of nursery rhymes. Rocking myself to sleep with pesticide-free vegetables and a climate neutral house. It doesn't work. I don't sleep, I lie awake.

I scroll further down my timeline, click on a link to an article about 'ecological grief' in Greenland, whose people are confronted with the effects of climate change every day and grieve for their lost world. The Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht has come up with a name for it: *solastalgia*, from the Latin 'solacium', meaning solace, and the Greek word for pain, 'algia'. Where you once found solace in the landscape, you now find pain.

Maybe that's what is ailing me, but my sinking feeling is not limited to the landscape. It is the divisiveness in our neighborhood, our city, the country. Things coming undone. It's the daily stream of apocalyptic news: housing shortages, the burn-out epidemic, refugees living behind fences, the death of democracy and of the last northern white rhino. It is my neighbor down the street who is incensed that they've taken away his Black Pete. It's the other neighbor, the one who calls the climate crisis a conspiracy. This year she is supposed to take her first airplane trip ever, and suddenly is supposed to be ashamed of it because of the climate kooks like me and our anti-airline industry petitions. Never mind that I galivanted from continent to continent in a time when she spent her family vacations crunched into 40 square meters.

I sink while my children lie in bed a few meters away, and I think of a verse from a poem by Fernando Pessoa that a friend once read to me:

Beyond the bend in the road  
there may be a well, a castle.  
There may be simply more road.  
I neither know nor ask.  
As long as I'm on the road before the bend  
I simply look at the road before the bend,  
since I can see only the road before the bend.<sup>1</sup>

How wonderful and comforting those words once were to me, whereas now I get short of breath at the thought of that road without sight of the distance. Solastalgia. I want to climb higher, beyond the bend, look at the valley and the mountains. I am in search of a road that takes me past the doomsday scenarios, past the half-solutions and the divisions—to a wide and breathtaking vista.

'Things fall apart,' says the American Insta-activist now. Isn't that a book title? Who wrote it again...? I want to google it, but the activist has moved on to the 'brokenness' she sees around her, and I toss a hand-clapping emoji into the livestream for that word, 'brokenness'. It's exactly what I feel.

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by A. S. Kline © 2018

I think of a famous photo, the ‘Hubble Ultra Deep Field’, taken by the Hubble telescope from some 550 kilometers above Earth. On it you see a deep black background full of illuminated shards. Light that varies from bright white to a kind of soft orange, from fluorescent lamp to light bulb, and if you look carefully, the shards all differ in shape. Bizarre spirals, sparkling snail shells, some whose sharp points stick out in all points of the compass, like the star of Bethlehem.

The photo is a composite of a series of observations the telescope made from September 2003 to January 2004. What look like individual shards are in fact thousands of galaxies, light years from us in the constellation Fornax. ‘We saw to the edge of all there is,’ Tracy K. Smith wrote in her poem about the Hubble’s images. ‘So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back.’

If you know what you’re looking at, the photo is overwhelming. An unassuming bit of darkness above our heads sparkles and shines. Some shards of light are the oldest galaxies we know of, formed in the first five hundred million years after the Big Bang. These galaxies are long extinct, because the light we see has been traveling for billions of years before being picked up by the Hubble telescope. The Hubble does not only look forward into space, but back in time.

The first time I saw the Hubble Ultra Deep Field was in 2006 at the Space Expo, the museum adjoining the European Space Agency (ESA) in Noordwijk, the Netherlands. That year I had undertaken to become the ESA’s ‘house poet’. I’d had a longtime fascination for outer space. For me, the cosmos was the place for not-knowing, not-being, not-seeing. The awareness of being surrounded by it has always made me feel liberated.

I emailed the Space Expo, asking if I might use the museum as a temporary workplace, adding that I had actually wanted to study astronomy but that it became Religious Studies instead, specializing in Islamic mysticism, another route to the unknown. The then-director, Rob van den Berg, sent a friendly email back, inviting me to occasionally come write in the Space Expo.

That photo—the Hubble Ultra Deep Field—hung near the entrance to the exposition space. It was backlit in an otherwise darkened corridor. I spent entire mornings staring at it, mesmerized. The incomprehensibility of thousands of galaxies, hundreds of billions of stars in all.

But I wasn’t able to write a poem about it. I got no further than a single stanza. In it, I drew a parallel between the expanse of shards and a Jewish creation myth in which a vat full of light shatters into billions of pieces. According to the myth, all those shards eventually become life. Humans, animals, even words: holy shards of light. Each shard of light, says the myth, is nostalgic for the vat in which everything was once all together. So with every encounter between shards there is a yearning for yet more light, whether those shards are people, animals, plants, or letters.

The broken world is a yearning world.

I set my phone aside. Out on the square, the first bird announces daybreak with a tentative *prrryit*—a blackbird, a great tit?

The youngest shouts something in his sleep and I go to the next room to have a look. He’s sitting upright in bed, his toddler’s face flushed from the heat. ‘Drink.’ His brother is in a deep sleep on his sweat-drenched pillow. They look different in these hot nights: bigger, more helpless. When I go downstairs to fetch a bottle from the dishwasher, a plastic tiger on the counter catches my eye. The toy tiger that the younger one has been dragging around with him for weeks now. Of the nine

subspecies of tiger, I read recently, three are already extinct and the other six are severely endangered. I pick up the plastic tiger and throw it in the garbage along with the kitchen waste. I don't want a toy in my house that reminds me that my children are growing up with animals that will no longer exist in the wild by the time they are grown. On the way to the stairs I reconsider, go back and dig the tiger out of the garbage bin. An old raisin is stuck to its back. I rinse it off, place it back on the counter. If living tigers are slowly disappearing, the least we can do is hang onto the plastic fake ones.

While the youngest one is drinking from his bottle, I think of an article I read about 'regretful mothers': women who wish they hadn't had children. I don't regret my children for even a second, I wanted them more than anything in life. But looking at my son drinking from his bottle, I do feel a sort of remorse. A regret that is bigger than myself—intergenerational regret, if such a thing exists. Remorse for the billions of human decisions, large and small, that now saddle him with a very somber future. The bottle is empty, my son rolls over and is overcome by the kind of instant sleep only little children experience.

Back in bed, I google the Hubble Ultra Deep Field photo. The light shards are less impressive on a smartphone than on the meters-high enlargement at the Space Expo, but they are still beautiful. You wish you could swipe yourself to them, these glittering beacons in the darkness. According to that Jewish creation myth, this is actually our mission: to reconnect the shards. Words, people, animals, plants—gather everything back together until it makes sense again.

Seen from the point of view of the myth, it's all the same brokenness: climate change, the rift in my neighborhood, the extinction of animals, fungi, trees. Being separated from things around us that we should be able to connect with: a tree, an ocean, another human being.

Maybe I should finish that poem about the Hubble Ultra Deep Field after all. I check my phone: 4:20 a.m. and still sleepless. The children, a house move, the world racing in the fast lane—they have narrowed my horizon. It's like I can only zoom in on the chaos occurring at eye level. All that zooming in, I now realize, has alienated me from something, from the sensation of being part of something bigger, being able to bob around on a rhythm outside myself. I have become too focused on the few square meters around me, on that obsessive 'now' of Insta stories and live blogs and news feeds, I'm bloated from the urgency of it all. I want to shrink, zoom out for an overview of sorts, and to see things, myself, others, in their proper proportion.

I look back at the shards on my smartphone. The thought of the Hubble helps counteract that sinking feeling. Somewhere above the Earth floats an enormous eye that sees four billion times better than we do. A collective pupil, built by mutual effort, gazing out into space on our behalf. Can a person be jealous of a telescope? I experience something like envy. To gaze into space, day and night: the ideal remedy for my suffocating feeling.

*translation: Jonathan Reeder*

## About Marjolijn van Heemstra

Poet, novelist, and playwright Marjolijn van Heemstra (b. 1981) holds a master's degree in religion. Her first poetry collection, *If Moses Had Gone On Questioning* (2009) won the Jo Peters Poetry Prize. She debuted as a novelist with *The Last of the Aedemas* (2012). Her novel *And His Name Is* was nominated for the Libris Literature Prize.



Photo ©Frank Ruiters

## First press quotes

- “To see the world through the eyes of Marjolijn van Heemstra is a wondrous and valuable experience. Van Heemstra is not just a fantastic writer, but also a unique and exceptionally beautiful thinker. Everything that Marjolijn writes about becomes fascinating.” – Babs Gons (author)
- “A hopeful and moving quest for cosmological consciousness and human connection. Marjolijn van Heemstra shines a light on the shimmering threads that connect our existence in the present to the endlessness of space and time.” – Govert Schilling (science journalist)
- “An intelligent book. Marjolijn van Heemstra perfectly describes the powerless feeling that seems to have taken a hold of society. By zooming out, she zooms in.” – Aldith Hunkar (journalist)