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Hester Knibbe

A Thin Permanence

Contemporary Dutch Poets

'Knibbe's voice can be harrowingly clear and dreamily disorienting, often in the same poem – but it's a fortifying and ennobling one nonetheless.'
American poet and critic Christian Wiman

Een dunne duurzaamheid (A Thin Permanence) is the title of one of Hester Knibbe's collections. The title says much about her poetry: a poetry in which the attention for things permanent invariably combines with themes like vulnerability, fragility, transience. Permanence, says Knibbe, is only appearance, in a sense, because all those things that seem to have stood the test of time – classic art, Greek mythology, Chinese temples – have not always remained the same: 'Change has always been/ here'.

It is change, the motion of life, which Knibbe tries to come to grips with in her poems. Not to understand it unequivocally, but to probe it, give it a form by which to get hold of it. Her subjects may be foreign, distant, or highly intimate, as in the incisive cycle 'Antidood' (Antideath), about a mother whose son falls seriously ill. A perilous subject for someone inclined to the pathetic, but not for Knibbe, who knows how to transform it into strong, unsentimental poetry. She keeps her distance, finds images that represent the actual events as well as her personal experience of them. Emotions are expressed in subtle, mostly indirect ways, as in a moving dream about a small child which, warmly wrapped up and firmly held, slowly freezes – 'a film of ice/ coated its eyes, its mouth. I cried out'.

'Simultaneously austere and elaborate, her poems investigate contradiction and ambiguity: the "flexibility of stone", the Persephone who is complicit in her own kidnapping, the fluidity between dream life and the waking world.'
London based American poet Kathryn Maris

Since 1982, Knibbe has published over a dozen volumes of poetry. In 2001 she received the Anna Blaman Prize for her work. The jury report emphasized the development that is so apparent in this oeuvre: a development 'from tentative, groping poems to an effective, sure-footed poetry which stands as if it has always been here.' In 2015, her collection *Archaïsch de dieren* (Archaic the Animals) won the top Dutch-language poetry prize, the VSB Poetry Prize; she was also appointed as the Rotterdam City Poet Laureate.

Comparing the poems from her earliest collections, *Tussen gebaren en woorden* (Between Gestures and Words) and *Meisje in badpak* (Girl in a Bathing Suit) with those in the latest volume, we find much similarity, especially in form – frequent use of internal rhyme and enjambment, flowing rhythm – but striking differences and an ongoing poetic evolution.

Jan Baeke

Ten poems

translated by Willem Groenewegen () and Judith Wilkinson (**)*

To Have That*

Please Take Him Away from Here*

From 'No Other Way', no.10*

From 'The Dogs', no.8*

From 'I Made Him Up', no.4*

No Objection, No Sound Either**

Working at Love**

Written Down**

Politics in Our Family**

A Moment of Charm**

Taken from: *Iedereen is er* (Everyone is Here; 2004), *Groter dan de feiten* (Larger than the Facts; 2007), *Brommerdagen* (Motorbike Days; 2010), *Het tankstation op de route* (The Gas Station along the Route; 2013) and *Seizoensroddel* (Seasonal Gossip; 2015).

To Have That

So beautiful, so useful, so unrelenting
this moon, while you are sitting next to me
while flowers bounce off you
and none of my words or glances
succeed in coming between
your telephone calls.
You, of course, have all that wavy hair
and that magazine look.

I should have the moon
whispers the captivated body inside me
that's testing the chair
as if someone is coming to get this body.

There, a knife is glinting.
There, the limbs I am about to lose.
What the hell is going on here
I shout
while the nurse
pin-points the needle on my upper arm.

Please Take Him Away from Here

A man like the one recently found, nicely made
a little younger for this occasion and glancing
in such a way that his hand can shake yours
and his voice can bring coolness.

Opposite this the world, large, nowhere clearly defined
won back from the newspaper, the bar table and the blind stream
of cigarettes, but lost after the procession
when a tougher farewell awaits than to the dead
whom we toast and toast.

Clouds are copied in thought
so that, also in thought, shadows dominate
the squares and conversations and bring coolness
in those inexplicably persistent minutes of heat, of
smiling people who explain to you
how suicide works and road construction
who denounce those inexplicably persistent minutes.

Between the man and the world
the parts of an entire season
lots of skirts, smoke and sunlight in every window, walkers from the left
and cyclists around the corner where the containers are.

Days when few things happen at the appointed time.
The rest doesn't happen at all.

from 'No Other Way', no. 10

Motionless. On the other hand
the body turned over along a line of trees
skipping thoughts, a wandering line.

The city grows smaller, needs more than little fields
wants rust and litter
and a subsiding road
between vacated chapels.

Little bright fires between the hills
as long as the sun tolerates a lack of distinction.
Children with impermeable skin colours
shout among the washing.

Perhaps a hotel bill, a napkin
branded with escape routes.
In a bright pool
almost tangible who smokes the same cigarettes.

Wintry light
and milk on the horizon
to sketch hours of thinking
by heart, after nature
summarising, rhyming, orpine, crop damage.

from 'The Dogs', no. 8

Words like coffee, sun and car
don't wear as easily in use
as beauty, restlessness and sleep.

Under the influence of coffee and sleep
in the presence of thoughts washed ashore from the night
the city attains the necessary depth.

Just by looking through the window
without giving heed to the sun, to the gleam
that marks the car owner's face

I can see the gravity and tragedy
of every trip to the newsagent's, to the baker's
of the shaking of hands

a farewell that sends one person into an office block
and the other walking off to one side
which makes this morning worse

worse as in further away from what I've written
further as in finished speaking
and in need of the first glass of wine.

from 'I Made Him Up', no. 4

On the road as always, read my hand
bought a canary
saw you.

Looked round out of faith.
Then let my voice fly, clapped after it
pointed so hard that everyone looked.

Now you and I are into other fabrications
we are getting
stranded in a secret.

Not here not in this room
not like this.
Infuriating words.

Not the answer of whatever canary
which is always less
and enough.

This is what the canary voices:
the sound of a room
with no one inside.

No Objection, No Sound Either

I saw spring come and wondered
how we should embark on this
new, ever-recurring time.

I played a song that had fallen between us
and broke because we were arguing fiercely.

The sun had come back and the neighbours were puffing away
through the music.
Enough wind to blow a life clean.

I washed the clothes
that you'll never wear again.

I saw you off, said goodbye to you
explained to you that the flowers and the visits
wanted to mean everything.
You made no objection, no sound either.

I went home to put it all in place
and to wait and see what the chairs and the bed
and the empty space in your coat
want to mean.

Working at Love

It's a lot of work, it tends to be too much work
love, said our advisers, was warm and full of folds.
We could picture this.

It was warm when love was opportune.
There'd been a lot of reaping and tying of sheaves. It turned out
that what fills the world and erodes it could be found nearby.
About time that we did something in return.

That we could learn how current love is? my friends asked.
That's often possible, I suggested, but we can't do that.
It's a personal love, with its own tunnel.

God, when he's on duty, prefers to stand here, near this tunnel
having a smoke and happy he's not in his office.
With his large, lanky body he's always self-conscious
afraid he'll attract attention, worried that people might think
he's afraid of attracting attention.

It's work that keeps recurring, he says, and my friends
are impressed because it's God who's saying this
and because, in the photograph, he's the only one in focus.

Written Down

Glad we were able to strike at the heart.
Written to the brotherhood
that we lack the ability to really access our knowledge
but should hope that through faith
all will become clear to us.

It was a warm day
and the bread and the olives
were having a rough time.
We're strangers here.
Is there another way to say that?
Even the bread and the olives are here by chance.

We have learned
to name things by their shape and flavour
and that explains enough.

When, despite the heat, you came to ask
who had invented the word
in which bread stayed fresh and fragrant
all I could do was point to the end of the street
where there are signposts
where someone happened to be passing
who called himself Gabriel
and where a bird began to sing on a roof
a piercing song, like a stab to your spleen.

What you really wanted to know
was the word for love
but there wasn't one.
Only for the fear that goes with it.

Politics in Our Family

A late afternoon sun. Aunts formal and drunk
in defiance of common custom, went inside early
chapter and verse on Adamo postponed
until a next birthday.

It came, but we were absent, my brother and I
he was busy seeing how tomatoes grow on the land
their feminine shape
and busy not thinking about me, particularly me.

Anything can deteriorate.
We had history and politics
and both were fond of crises.
I thought they occurred when the aunts
drank too lustily too loudly, lapsed into old sores
as my parents would say.

Usually my aunts would monopolise the afternoon
sing Adamo at the top of their voices
eager for background laughter.

It came, but didn't include my brother
who was demolishing the leftovers, then his own details
and declared that it's quite something
he's still alive.

We chose beautiful flowers
that the aunts consider suitable
for any stones.

A Moment of Charm

See how I talk to you between two flashes.
Flesh under the dresses
downy bumble bees buzzing past.
For our bodies this summer is much too hot.

Of course the moon, madam
and all those other phenomena
a silhouette in which one can imagine
hands and thighs. Is it your daughter? I love her.

I'm conscious of this particular time.
We can expect difficult days with the family.
The shadows cast on you and yours are not too bad
although so many people are struggling in these rainy days

in the middle of summer
but how are health and business matters?
It would be good to greet the most attractive among you.
I like to do that when I get the opportunity.

I've never been able to accept the idea
that our thinking is a wholly abstract affair.
Touching you is the convincing proof
that my imagination takes a real shape.

This brochure is part of the Contemporary Dutch Poets-series. To receive more information or other brochures from this series, visit www.letterenfonds.nl or write to Thomas Möhlmann (e-mail address below).

For additional information and other Dutch and Frisian poets in English translation, please also visit the Dutch domain of Poetry International Web: <http://poetryinternationalweb.net>

Translation Grants

For publishers intending to publish a work by a Dutch or Frisian poet in translation, subsidies are available to cover up to 100 per cent of the translation costs. Applications will be judged based on the quality of the source text, the translation and the publisher. For information about translators please contact the foundation. Specifically in case of a publication of poetry in translation, a foreign publisher or magazine editor can also apply for additional financial assistance.

Promotional Travel

The Foundation is able to support a publisher wishing to invite an author for interviews or public appearances. International literary festivals are likewise eligible for support.

For information on Dutch poetry and grants please contact:
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Hester Knibbe (b. 1946) is the current poet laureate of the city of Rotterdam. She chaired the Dutch PEN between 2008 and 2010, and published fifteen books of poetry to date, earning her a number of prestigious Dutch prizes, among which the Herman Gorter Prize (2000), the A. Roland Holst Prize (2009) and the VSB Poetry Prize (2015).

Poetry (selection)

Archaïsch de dieren (Archaic the Animals, 2014)

Oogsteen (Eye Stone, Selected Poems 1982-2008, 2009)

De buigzaamheid van steen (The Flexibility of Stone, 2005)

Een dunne duurzaamheid (A Thin Permanence, 1999)

Meisje in badpak (Girls in a Bathing Suit, 1992)

Tussen gebaren en woorden (Between Gestures and Words, 1982)

Knibbe's poems have been translated in German, French, Spanish, Turkish and Hebrew. In 2015 her first major collection in English, *Hungerpots* (transl. Jacquelyn Pope), appeared at Eyewear Publishing, London.



‘Hester Knibbe’s poems expose the field of tension between what remains and what withers away.’
Belgian poet and critic Paul Demets