

**Review**  
**Cees Nooteboom:**  
***Leaving: A poem from the time of the virus***  
Drawings by Max Neumann  
David Colmer (trans.)  
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*Reviewed by Désirée Schyns*



CEES

NOOTEBOOM

*Leaving*

Drawings by  
Max Neumann

TRANSLATED BY  
DAVID COLMER

In the year 2020, Dutch author Cees Nootboom (b. 1933, The Hague) who considers poetry at the heart of his oeuvre, and who published a new collection of poems (*Vos*) in February 2022, published a small volume with the very unambiguous title: *Afscheid*. The subtitle *Gedicht uit de tijd van het virus (A poem from the time of the virus)*, makes us realize that the three series of eleven poems have been written during the pandemic. As the poet says in his afterword, the poems he started to write at the beginning of 2020 took another turn, not only because of the pandemic, but in the first place because he was given a folder of drawings that brought to his mind a pre-Socratic text by Empedokles. The drawings Nootboom refers to are made by the German artist Max Neumann and connect with the lines by Empedokles in the fourth and eleventh poem in the first series of *Afscheid*. Neumann had already inspired and accompanied Nootboom for the creation of *Zelfportret van een ander* (1993), a series of prose poems, translated in 2018 by David Colmer as *Self-portrait of an Other*. The distinguished Australian translator David Colmer, who was awarded several prizes for his translations of Dutch poetry into English (among others the James Brockway Prize for his oeuvre in 2021), is also the translator of Nootboom's *Licht overal* from 2012 (*Light everywhere*, 2014) and *Monniksoog* from 2016 (*Monk's eye*, 2019). It is no surprise that he is responsible for the transferring of the poems in *Afscheid*, published in English under the title *Leaving* with 33 drawings by Neumann, unlike the Dutch original which appeared without Neumann's visualizations. In the Dutch original Nootboom announces that the drawings were meant to be published in the English translation ("*De tekeningen die bedoeld waren voor de engelse vertaling van David Colmer die bij Seagull Press zal verschijnen, zijn gemaakt door schilder Max Neumann*"). This draws attention to the unique way in which Nootboom's work circulates in translation: some of his volumes of poems are published in a different form than the original Dutch publication (like *Leaving*), some of his collections of essays contain different pieces chosen from his work in different countries (for instance *Nootbooms hotel*, translated as *Nomad's hotel* in English) and his collected works are not being published in the original language but in German translation (with Suhrkamp Verlag).

In *Leaving*, death is present from the beginning of the first series, but in the first poem the poetic voice is still lingering in the familiar setting of the house and garden in Menorca, Spain, where Nootboom lives during the summer, and where many of the scenes of the recently translated *533: A book of days* are situated: "the bare fig against the wall/with the thousand-year-old stones" (3). But then the poet moves to a disturbing dreamlike realm of childhood memories and the trauma of the war years in The Hague, the city of his birth: "He'd seen that in the war, defeated soldiers/ in retreat, frightened, dirty, the mouths/ that sang so heartily when they marched in/ now closed" (5). In the second series, the poet

stages himself in the contemplation of some of Neumann's disquieting drawings of heads, which become a sort of grimacing and monstrous procession of humanity: "No love here, only violence,/loneliness, melancholy, the form/ of an animal, a man accompanied by/ his guillotine, a child without a mouth" (35). Gradually, in the third series, individual death appears, the end of personal life: "What had you hoped/ to preserve? The sound of a voice,/ the memory of a shoulder" (57). The last six poems of the series illustrate the act of leaving itself: not only they describe an inexorable march that merges with time, on a path deserted by all, but in their form, with increasingly short lines, they progress towards absence, nothingness, towards "no one" – the last words of the volume; "Blind I walk on, a grey dog/ in the cold. This must be it,/ the place I say goodbye to myself/ and slowly become/ no one" (71).

In *Leaving*, Neumann's haunting drawings and Nootboom's poems form a poetic connection, like in poem 6 of the second series where Nootboom evokes "A ship founders right through a face,/ a rotting source, a three-master/ through closed eyes, who/ is the creator?" (37) beside a drawing of a figure of death who wears a foghorn and whose face is reminiscent of Death in Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*. Another example of the poetic connection is poem 4 of the second series where Nootboom describes "a transparent body menaced/ by the executioner's helper" (33) next to a drawing of an executioner beside an axe which hangs off the paper like the axe of a guillotine.

Beyond the artist's drawings and the poet's words that match very well in this volume, there is also a strong connection between the Dutch poet and the Australian translator. Thanks to several contributions on translation, we have an idea of David Colmer's translation poetics. In an interview he granted me in the winter of 2021, Colmer, who is also the translator of the acclaimed poetry by the Dutch-Caribbean poet Radna Fabias (*Habitus* 2021), said that translation is above all an interpretation of words and lines that are anchored in a place, time, society and culture of a non-English-speaking audience. In his view, poetry translation means that the voice of the foreign-language author must become his, or in the case of Fabias, her voice in English. Thanks to the intimate conversation with and knowledge of Nootboom's poetry and also thanks to the collaboration with the poet, Colmer found a rhythm and tone for the lonely and somber voice in *Afscheid*. As in his other collections of poetry Nootboom raises metaphysical questions and his poems explore limits, not only in a logical sense, but also in relation to Dutch grammar. Colmer is able to follow Nootboom very closely, while also transforming the lines which become new living material in a new language. Translation is not a sterile copy of the original but entails interpretation. For instance: "*Soms bedrieglijk normaal zoals de moeder / van dode soldaten, dan weer een schim naast/ een wrak, het oneigenlijke kent vele personen, de droom is*

*een boze/verzinner*" (26). The translator has a preference for the word "spectre" for "*schim*" ("shadow") and has chosen "the unreal" for "*het oneigenlijke*." His translation as a form of recreation of the poetry in English becomes visible in "a cast of thousands" for "*vele personen*," and "*de droom is een boze/ verzinner*" where the dream becomes a noun and is no longer a person: "dream, a malevolent/ imagination" – "At times deceptively normal like the mother/ of a dead soldier, then a **spectre** beside/ a wreck, **the unreal has a cast**/ of thousands, dream, a malevolent/**imagination**" (33).

*Leaving* is a striking example of translation as transformation for a new reading audience. In translation not only words and lines are enveloped in a new language, covers and paratexts are also newly framed. Whereas *Afscheid* is a small volume with a black shimmering cover with a photograph in which we can discover part of a stone sarcophagus taken from a György Kurtág CD, *Leaving* is larger, with a light green cover and a drawing by Neumann in black and white. The covers appeal to different senses when we read Nootboom's poetry about desolation and beauty. The cover's drawing in the English edition depicts a head gazing at an indistinct swarm of birds. Seeing and contemplation are very important themes in Nootboom's oeuvre (see also *Der Augenmensch Cees Nootboom* by Daan Cartens, 1995). On the Dutch cover the photograph shows two ears carved in ancient stone that possibly refer to the mystery of human life and suffering for which there is no answer. It is as if Nootboom suggests that God is deaf and blind. His poems are indeed evocations of a struggle with time, impermanence and eternity, especially in *Leaving* where absence and death have a strong presence. As in other poems, Nootboom takes inspiration from surrounding nature, like shells, fig trees and stones. The poet breathes life into these lifeless things. Meditating on the stone photograph and on the relation between art and life, Nootboom asks in the first poem of the third series: "Is the stone listening,/ does it hear when I ask what it means?/ I keep quiet. I want to know what it hears and/ hear silence" (51). In *Leaving*, the Dutch poet speaks to us in a strong voice, evoking all our senses thanks to the empathic, creative translation by David Colmer.

### **About the reviewer:**

Désirée Schyns is an associate professor at Ghent University (Belgium), where she teaches translation French-Dutch and Translation Studies. She is director of the Research Group TRACE (Translation and Culture) and has published widely on translation and memory, translation and testimony, and translation in a postcolonial context. She is the author of *La mémoire littéraire de la guerre d'Algérie dans la fiction algérienne francophone* (L'Harmattan, 2012); and co-

editor of *Translation in exile* (2018), *Denken over poëzie en vertalen, de dichter Cees Nootboom in vertaling* (Academia Press, 2018), *Zwemmen in talen* (Poëziecentrum, 2020) and *Translating memories of violent pasts* (forthcoming 2022). She is also a literary translator from French into Dutch and is currently collaborating on the translation of Marcel Proust's *Les soixante-quinze feuillets et autres manuscrits inédits* (2021).

