

WRITING



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EDUCATION

Whither the Workshop? Andrew Cowan, Sam Kelly, Richard Beard

NAWE Northampton Conference Collection: Julie MacLusky; Vanessa Gebbie & Sienek de Rooij; Danielle Jawando & Bernie Howley; Heather Richardson; Caroline Murphy; Susan Greenberg, Hilary Jenkins & Julie Wheelwright; Nigel Smith; Wes Brown with David Tait & Daniel Sluman

plus: Linda Anderson; Dave Attrill; Ardella Jones; Derek Neale; Ian Pople; Siobhan Wall; The Writer's Compass; news; reviews



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A Poem in the Space between Languages

A writing experiment at the NAWE Conference 2011

Vanessa Gebbie and Sienieke de Rooij



Dutch writer and teacher Sienieke de Rooij arrived at the NAWE Conference with a poem written in her mother tongue and the intention of writing an English version over the weekend. In conversation, she and fellow delegate Vanessa Gebbie decided to enjoy a little international collaboration, but not with the sole aim of producing a suitably poetic translation. They decided to see if there could be a meaningful 'mirror' response to a poem written in a foreign language, a language unknown to the respondent, who would be given only minimal information.

Using Sienieke's Dutch poem as inspiration, and without knowing what it was about, Vanessa (who does not read or speak Dutch) would 'respond' with her own quick 'translation'.

The results were, we think, worth sharing. The process can perhaps be divided into five stages.

1. First, Sienieke translated the title – *Ik ben een kind*, 'I am a child'. She then read the poem out loud, in Dutch, and Vanessa followed the Dutch text. Vanessa would say later that hearing the poem read, whilst not 'understanding' on the most immediate level, was an extraordinary experience. It had been hard to find a quiet corner in the hotel, somewhere they could escape the tinny 'music' in the public areas. So the first words to drop into the space they found were those of the

poem. It broke down for her into a flow of sound without overt meaning. Inflection, rhythm and tone took on a heightened significance.

Sienieke then translated the short very simple first lines of each stanza, viz- *Ik zie een wolk*, 'I see a cloud' (which Vanessa promptly forgot, remembering it as 'sky' ...!), *Ik zie een kat*, 'I see a cat', and *Ik zie een golf*, 'I see a wave.' And without further conversation, Vanessa took this Dutch text to her room to see what would happen...

Ik ben een kind

*Ik zie een wolk
ik denk: zo vredig te vliegen
verwondering boven de wereld
maar een wolk
hagelt van woede
regent machteloos leeg
vervolgt in mist.
Ik ren krachtig
ik ben een kind.*

*Ik zie een kat
ik denk: zo door tuinen te sluipen
op rooftocht op donkere daken
maar een kat
verspilt acht van zijn levens
aan slapen en spinnen
zijn wilde geest getemd.
Ik mag razen
ik ben een kind.*

*Ik zie een golf
ik denk: rollen en schuimen en bruisen
vermengen met wereldzeeën
de continenten omspoelen
maar de golf
die wil bonken en beuken*

*verlooit in het schelpige zachtzand.
Ik kan reizen
ik ben een kind.*

*Ik
ren
raas
reis
door het leven,
kind.*

Sieneke de Rooij, Nederland

2. A short while later, Vanessa returned with her 'translation'. She began to read it to Sieneke and they were both surprised by the emotional intensity of the experience – the reading of, and the hearing of a first draft poem written 'off the cuff' as a response to a mainly incomprehensible stimulus, an attempt to mirror it in some way.

I am a child

*I see the sky
I think - how endless it is
hovering, holding the world
but the sky
is pierced by trees
and shredded by the flight of birds
whose wings stir the mist.
I just remember
I am a child.*

*I see a cat
I think - how he uncurls and slips
over the rooftops, over high walls
but the cat
will not always land in safety
one day he will spin, and fall
his freedom must end.
I can imagine
I am a child.*

*I see a wave
I think – how it rolls and heaves and shines
in its journeying
and ties the world together
but the wave
must crash and break
one day – nothing is for ever.
I have a journey
I am a child.*

3. Sieneke and Vanessa then discussed the two poems. They were both stunned by the effect of this experiment, as they discovered all the layers of content in Vanessa's new poem, purely based on sound, visual impression of text and four 'clues' only.

It became obvious that there were both expected and unexpected similarities between the two. The overall shape of each English stanza was roughly the same as the Dutch inspiration. The vocabulary was very different, the images too – but there was a surprise to come.

In each verse, the English version mirrored the Dutch thematically – in that the simple thing seen by the child, introduced in line 1 (which Vanessa knew) was followed by the thought process of the child 'narrator' over the next two lines. The thought process then pivoted at *maar* / 'but' into a consideration of change/impermanence/loss of potency/a death metaphor.

It was very clear to Sieneke how Vanessa's new poem echoed the atmosphere and feelings of her first poem, and that the images of nature that Vanessa breathed in from her *Ik ben een kind* were breathed out in Vanessa's new *I am a child*. Also, the second poem reflects the feeling of invincibility and everlasting life of a child, as opposed to the crumble and fall it sees in nature, in the original poem.

4. The writers were very intrigued at these similarities, and looked at how this might have happened.

Remembering the process:

Vocabulary clues: There were several words whose meaning crossed the Channel – *ik denk* sounded like 'I think' to Vanessa. And it fitted. *Wereld* sounded like 'world' and *rollen* like 'rolling', but all other words were just shapes on the page, and sound. Vanessa studied French a long time ago, and *maar* in its repeated position in each stanza, prefacing a repetition of the subject of the first line of each, felt to her like *mais* / 'but'.

Tone/Sound clues: Sieneke's reading was very important. The tone used indicated that the poem thoughtful, not intended to be dramatic, or light and amusing. Perhaps Sieneke had paused before *maar* and emphasized that word in its place, where each stanza turned a corner.

The inexplicable element seemed to be the similarities in theme. The focus on impermanence, change and loss,

when the title, and the first lines only mentioned *kind*, *wolk*, *kat*, and *golf* - child, cloud, cat, and wave.

Of course, those themes are not infrequently found in poetry – but both Sienieke and Vanessa were struck by the echoes via which deeper levels of ‘meaning’ were communicated somewhere in the space between their respective languages.

5. To escort this poem back to its mother language, Sienieke then translated Vanessa’s new poem into Dutch. She tried to keep Vanessa’s content in images and atmosphere, while bringing into her translation the rhythm and sound she likes to use in her Dutch. This may take the form of connecting consonants or vowels, rhythm in sentences or stanzas, and double meanings of words.

Kind

*Ik zie de lucht
ik zie ruimte zonder einde
maar de lucht
wordt doorboord door bomen
versnipperd door vogelvlucht
hun vleugels scheuren de mist.
Dat zie ik,
ik ben een kind.*

*Ik zie een kat
ik zie hem strekken en sluipen
over daken en hoge muren
maar de kat
is niet altijd meer veilig
ooit zal hij tolleren en vallen
zijn vrijheid kapot.
Dat weet ik,
ik ben een kind.*

*Ik zie een golf
zie rollen en stijgen en dansen
zie hem de wereld verbinden
maar de golf zal zijn reis
moeten breken
en neerslaan - niets is voor eeuwig.
Mijn reis gaat door,
ik ben een kind.*

*Ik zie
weet
reis
door het leven,
kind.*

Sienieke and Vanessa were very much inspired by this experience. They both felt it would make a useful exercise to do with students. A teacher could take poems in unknown languages (or even script) and encourage students to reflect and write from them. Ideally, a reader should provide the sound experience. And just like twelve students in a painting course will produce twelve completely different paintings of the same vase with sunflowers, here, the differences in the new poems that students create will be interesting and worth exploring.

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