‘Deeper, Deeper, to the Bottom, Paula’

The Prose of Mensje van Keulen

A middle-aged lover of literature asked to place Mensje van Keulen in time would probably think of the seventies, a period long past but still very much alive in literary terms. It is time we re-evaluated certain writers of the period torn to pieces in Jeroen Brouwers’ defamatory pamphlet *De nieuwe Revisor*. ‘Boys’ literature’ was not the only genre he objected to which would come to be declared outstanding upon its revival. Other authors, more focused on story telling than literary design, were valued less in criticism at the time. These authors included Mensje van Keulen, pseudonym of Mensje Francine van der Steen (The Hague, 1946).

Narrators of the time such as Maarten ’t Hart and Mensje van Keulen, though generally judged by critics to be less important than the largely academically trained postmodernists clustered around the fashionable journal *De Revisor*, have matured to be great writers. Van Keulen’s work has a timelessness about it. It would not surprise me if she fed on the literature of ‘past’ authors such as Angus Wilson or Lawrence Durrell. At the same time her prose is deeply anchored in the seventies when she made her debut. This applies as much to the genre of Dutch parlour realism, her longstanding niche, as to the widely professed literary preferences of the time, Nescio and Elsschot’s melancholy. The influence of the naturalists of the early part of the last century and before also features prominently in her work. The way she incorporates these literary influences into her prose has changed over time. Mature writer as she now is, she no longer needs shock tactics such as those in an early novel like *Van Lieverlede* (Little by little, 1975), in which a snack bar manager throws hot chip fat at the crotch of a difficult customer. Even without such theatrics she succeeds in furnishing reality with a sense of doom.

What is literary criticism other than a series of argued choices? I consider *De Gelukkige* (The happy one, 2001) to be Van Keulen’s crowning glory. Here she rose above parlour realism, making a laudable stab at the threatening, morose, Calvinistic tone of Arthur van Schendel’s novels. De Gelukkige deserves to be a classic. Sadly in the public memory it is a long forgotten incident in a constantly growing supply of books.

Van Keulen started writing her most important prose in the nineties: the novels *De rode strik* (The red snare, 1994), *De Gelukkige* and *Liefde heeft geen*

Mensje van Keulen (1946)
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hersens (Love has no brains, 2012), and the collections of short stories *Het andere gezicht* (The other face, 2003) and *Een goed verhaal* (A Good Story, 2009).

The great strength of her short stories is the penetrating power of the tragedy and horror, often combined. Van Keulen's skill is apparent in the effortlessness of even her prose, like the work of a chess master approaching her endgame. 'Doris lived alone,' reads the opening of one story. It could not be starker. Another, 'Thieves were lurking everywhere, said her mother.'

Van Keulen follows two thematic lines within the short story genre, sometimes even within a single story. She has a penchant for homely gothic in the style of Roald Dahl's *Tales of the Unexpected*. This is exemplified to insane extremes in 'Zand' (Sand), where a woman bitterly accuses her husband of past unfaithfulness. The husband, locked in a magnificent, desperate monologue, goes to the beach to escape, only to be interminably raped by a big black man, the incident described to the last dysfunctionally sick detail. The second line is that of slice of life literature, in which silent despair and irrational internalised grief lie in wait, as in the exemplary prose of Raymond Carver, the Edward Hopper of the pen. I believe Van Keulen could afford to develop the slice of life line further, leave behind the frills (a contrived plot, overly conspicuous peculiarities) and describe her human characters' inner struggle straight up. Taking a step in this

direction, in her latest collection *Een goed verhaal* (A good story) her expert use of the inner monologue and monomaniacal stream of words raises all six stories from sketch status to a professional expression of the human condition. She cuts deepest when she adds irrational behaviour, as in 'Pilgrimage', when Paula, drunk, paws at a urinal: 'She draws her fingertips through the yellow syrupiness, which creeps under her nails. Deeper, deeper, to the bottom, Paula.'

Everyone grasps, gropes and screws

Van Keulen's best novels exhibit remarkable stamina. The modern fairy tale *De rode strik* (The red snare, 1994), set probably in the fifties, plays out in a provincial street in The Hague, full of petty hidden sorrows. Abandoned by her husband, the mother of Maria and Bee, both still children, starts seeing her husband's older cousin, 'ninety-seven kilos as nature intended him'. Initially all that alerts the sisters to Uncle Leen's existence is the presence of a bottle of Dutch gin in a cupboard, but that soon changes. He burps and farts out loud, has a 'nasty' way of doing up his flies, talks at length about his tattoos, suggests calling the rabbit 'Christmas', and, more disturbingly, ventures into very adult forms of harassment. After telling a bloody story he takes to using the ominous nickname Bambi for Maria. While wandering in a graveyard he says, 'Here's a children's corner. Seven years old, ten. (...) nine, two. There's a little girl called Maria as well.' Shortly after his violent death Maria sighs, 'I think the evil has left the street.'

According to Maarten 't Hart, an expert on the subject, Mensje van Keulen's work springs from two motives working in opposition. 'In her work the shop is the positive pole, blood the negative pole', he writes in his collection of essays *A Tie Pin from Tula*. Blood inspires disgust in her characters, while a shop offers comfort. According to 't Hart, the choice of the butcher Engelbert as the main character in the novel of the same name is Van Keulen's attempt to unite these poles.

't Hart's insight applies only partially in *De rode strik* (The red snare, 1994). Blood flows abundantly, as the title implies. 'The poacher's snare. When he catches a fox or a rabbit, it turns red.' Uncle Leen, who uses this threatening language, owns a shop himself, but it is not a pleasant place to be, let alone comforting. To eleven-year-old Maria and nine-year-old Bee's horror Uncle Leen trades in pest control products and writhing maggots. Maria also sees her mother and Uncle Leen 'doing it' in the back of the shop. The tradesmen Leen and Engelbert are certainly related figures in their oppressive grubbiness, but there is a more interesting correspondence between *Engelbert* (1987) and De rode strik. As Van Keulen makes the abject Engelbert increasingly more human and less hateful in the course of the novel, she presents the murder of the 'beast man' Leen by the two sisters in De rode strik as an entirely just act, something wholly natural. This follows from the narrative perspective, that of Maria, the main perpetrator.

This kind of lead character is vintage Van Keulen. In her narrative people are always somewhat unfathomable, never one hundred percent good. As she puts it in her Künstlerroman *De laatste gasten* (The last guests, 2007), 'There is no virtue, everyone grasps, gropes and screws.' Van Keulen is at her best

when she writes about crooks, who appear surprisingly charming and positive compared with their insidiously malicious fellow human beings, prattling on about moral values.

Shocking mortality

In this shady setting a title such as *De gelukkige* (The happy one) is atypical. It is, moreover, an imperative: the issue of the main character's happiness or lack thereof is settled immediately. The title suggests an association with naturalist novels, a genre which laid more emphasis on the 'weakness' of failing characters in the past than it does now. But Van Keulen's approach does not differ that much, as her first person narrator is far from happy.

Nora is a middle-aged woman who married the local car mechanic, Martin, when she was young. The marriage has endured through many years, in spite of Martin's unfaithfulness. Inspired by Martin, who is excited by the idea, Nora takes a lover, the architect Daniel. However, Martin fails to foresee the consequences. Nora, whose first and only love was Martin and who has always seen sex as a chore, falls head over heels for Daniel. She even follows him to Islamabad in Pakistan. In this repressive country, the situation goes swiftly downhill. Daniel drinks like a fish and takes to lashing out. So after three weeks Nora flees the country, back to her familiar haven, where Martin awaits her hopefully. In sum, Nora chases after her 'happiness' and returns disoriented.

This barebones summary captures the anecdotal themes, but does not do justice to the drama or the scope of a notion such as happiness as conceived within the novel. Fortunately Van Keulen does not provide a ready made answer to the question of whether Nora's happiness is attainable. There is something to be said for the various viewpoints expressed by the characters in question. Martin, the sober realist, is driven to desperation by Nora's ambivalent behaviour after her adventure in Pakistan: 'You think you had something beautiful. All women in love think so. But love isn't beautiful.' A village woman is also critical: 'You've no right to complain, Nora. You had it all. (...) You, you were the happy one.'

Van Keulen does not reply directly, but implies a great deal, the flood of suggestion forming the backbone of the novel. Nora's story might be explained with reference to her mother. As a doctor's wife from the city, she felt displaced in the oppressive Christian village where she was forced to live for the sake of her husband's honourable profession. Van Keulen plays extensively with narrative motifs, which all appear to lead to a sombre finale: death by one's own hand. There are multiple references to cats, a catlike smile, until it transpires that Nora's old furry friend was killed by a hail of shot – from Martin's gun? - during her adventure in Pakistan. No nine lives, just shocking mortality.

The enticing water swells continually in the background of Nora's adventures. 'Water is a gentle accomplice.' Other villagers too turn out to have sought death by drowning. In the end, mentally fragile as she may be, Nora chooses life. As for other hints contained within the novel, no clear resolution is forthcoming. After Nora's flight, Daniel seems to disappear off the face of the earth; perhaps something happens to him in Pakistan, but Nora cannot find out the truth. Together the strategically placed loose ends form a stifling web.

It is the details which are so effective. Even a teapot is sufficient for Van Keulen to conjure up a spirit seething with jealousy. In the summerhouse, where Martin has presumably been with his mistress, Nora finds her teapot: 'It was in the middle of the table, a withered bunch of wild flowers in it. Broom, dwarf aster, cornflowers, sage, thyme: grey and drooping, in my English teapot, the one I'd always used exclusively to make tea.'

A detail to conjure up the world

In her latest novel, *Liefde heeft geen hersens*, Van Keulen places even greater demands on the title, the one explicit point in the novel, also stated in the first sentence: 'love has no brains'. The expression is repeated throughout the story, to ensure that we understand the animal instincts driving people in Van Keulen's everyday horror world.

With a few elegant strokes of the pen, Van Keulen moves from that first sentence to invoke a scene reminiscent of Maria Callas, faded glory, a boudoir and Puccini's aria 'Vissi d'arte' from *Tosca*. We find ourselves in the apartment of the aged ballerina Irma in The Hague. As we know from the author Helga Ruebsamen, a literary relative, The Hague is not only pure brilliance, the better classes, pearl necklaces around wrinkled necks and the refined life of times past, it is also the scum of the earth and the little people of the servile working classes. Crime lurks in the background, base meanness. Illusions are stranded in prosaic reality. It is already embedded in the name of the young widow who comes to her neighbour Irma's apartment in the first scene to pay her respects. Romy she is called, after Romy Schneider, the film diva who played Sissi and met a grim end, with her son speared on a fence, and her subsequent suicide with sleeping pills. Her fate is commemorated in *Liefde heeft geen hersens* (Love has no brains), but really this is unnecessary. Van Keulen's gift is the chaining of associations, summoning up a world with a single detail.

Romy works as a tea lady at a funeral home and moonlights as a cleaning lady. Among her clients is Irma, who does not give a kick for the entire novel because she is stone dead. What does a normal person do on encountering one who has passed away? She telephones close relatives and the doctor. Not Romy. She is frightened by the dead woman's facial expression and suspects murder. 'This isn't a peaceful face with old, familiar lines. Not an empty face, but one still gripped with a spasm of horror.' Romy remembers Irma complaining about valuables disappearing from her house and immediately suspects her own son. So she patches up the body a little ('The most gruesome bit is the tongue, which bulges behind the teeth') and when she is finished it looks as if Irma has choked on a sandwich.

A little strange, to say the least. But there are no normal characters in Van Keulen's work. The horror is anchored in the very things that signify ordinary life. No one, it is impressed upon us, can be completely understood. Everyone has a screw or two loose. That is a theme throughout her work, which swarms with colourful, disturbed characters and eccentrics. The novel introduces a caretaker, Harro, who still lives with his elderly mother and in many ways resembles Norman Bates from Hitchcock's *Psycho*. There is a great deal not

right with him, we soon realise, but we do not discover exactly what. It remains suspicion, inflamed by a well chosen detail, the odd half remark. We learn that there was a woman in Harro's past, that she has a scar on her collarbone, a souvenir of him. Exactly how remains unclear, but it is enough to suggest that Harro is a freak, who presumably needs all these self-imposed rules and rituals in his life to keep himself in check, to say nothing of his tendency to stalk the object of his desire.

Van Keulen employs this kind of suggestion throughout *Love has no Brains*, to great effect. Virtuoso monologues and streams of consciousness suck us into the characters' lives, raising the relentlessly increasing tension to fever pitch. Everything and everyone is significant. In the end it no longer matters whether Irma was helped towards her end, or by whom, for we are busy following the creepy Harro as he approaches Romy; we want to know what is happening with Romy's daughter and her grossly obese friend; we are curious as to what Romy's disturbed, bisexual son will make of his life. Moreover, where is Irma's cat Freddie? And isn't Romy's new flame Eric just a little too perfect?

The horror of provincial life

Once again we cannot afford to make light of the power of Van Keulen's details. They reveal her razor-sharp eye for the horror of provincial life. Even in an apparently innocent paragraph the gaze is drawn towards a couch kept covered in plastic, 'so that in the summer you had to peel your bare legs free with a sucking noise'. The smell of overcooked sprouts rises straight off the page.

Van Keulen uses details to give shape to the two other pillars of her prose: her exceptional psychological insight into human relationships and her fascination with death. Given a funeral home setting, you know Van Keulen will really let rip. We read of a corpse that jumps up during cremation, 'when the furnace was stoked from 800 to 1,000 degrees'. We discover that the remains from cleared graves end up in the 'bone pit', 'Brown bones, shreds of clothing still hanging from them'. At the funeral home we also encounter a necrophilic employee, reminiscent of a similar character in just such a situation in Herodotus' *Histories*.

A single detail of Romy's memories of domestic violence reveals the true horror: 'a dishcloth stuffed in my mouth'. As stated above, Van Keulen does not do ordinary people. In itself that is nothing special. The deviant, the unusual, the accidental, these are standard ingredients in the literary test tube. What is special in Van Keulen's work is that her damaged, insane characters are such convincing creatures of flesh and blood that, engrossed in our reading, we accept them as normal. Van Keulen intentionally creates this illusion: her prose reads as a resounding 'no' to judging one's fellow human beings.

Viewed through this writer's lens the world is an ocean to be drawn on, an inexhaustible source. As we have seen, every detail counts. Take the incident at a famous actor's funeral: 'Beer', shouts a heavy voice. 'Where is the beer? Why isn't there beer?' Loading every detail like this is risky. If the target is missed, an expression out of place, it is conspicuous. Perfection is largely unattainable, but near-perfection, such as the gifted author Van Keulen seems constantly and effortlessly to exhibit, is worthy of admiration. ■

Translated by Anna Asbury

FURTHER READING

Mensje Van Keulen, *Liefde heeft geen hersens*, novel, 2012
Mensje Van Keulen, *Een goed verhaal*, short stories, 2009
Mensje Van Keulen, *De laatste gasten*, novel, 2007
Mensje Van Keulen, *Het andere gezicht*, stories, 2003
Mensje Van Keulen, *De gelukkige*, novel, 2001
Mensje Van Keulen, *De rode strik*, novel, 1994
Mensje Van Keulen, *Engelbert*, novel, 1987
Mensje Van Keulen, *Van Lieverlede*, novel, 1975

All Mensje van Keulen's books are published by Uitgeverij Atlas, now Atlas Contact, in Amsterdam. For a complete bibliography see www.mensjevankeulen.nl

Prima la Musica

Gerrit had been drinking and he walked home along the canal, singing loudly. First he sang, with a catch in his throat, a hit song that had been playing in the bar and was still sounding in his ears, then a children's song that always made him feel sad though he didn't know why, then a tear-jerker about two sailors, and by the time he entered the alley, it was Figaro's opening aria from *The Barber of Seville* that reverberated between the walls of a warehouse and a former girls' orphanage.

From the other end of the alley a woman was coming towards him. The only available light came through the cracks of a rollshade that covered the window of a flowershop, but it was enough to see that she wore an old-fashioned coat with a hood and that she was hiding her hands in her sleeves as though she felt cold. Convinced that she was going to ask him for money, Gerrit checked his pockets.

'Too bad,' he said when she had come closer, 'I'm clean out. I don't even have enough to pay for a small glass of beer.'

'I don't need money,' the woman said. 'But it's very kind of you to offer it.' She hesitated for a moment and then asked: 'You like to sing?'

'Oh yes,' Gerrit said. 'But I'm absolutely no good at it. That's why I only sing when I've had a few. My father was a piano tuner, and many's the time, when I was a kid, that I lay under a piano, listening to the music being played on it and the songs being sung to the music. Oh, how I'd like to sing the stars down from the sky, that must be the most marvelous thing there is.' And he looked at the sky high above the alley and sang, belting it out in a way that once upon a time would have awakened all the orphans most unpleasantly from their sleep: '*Bravo, bravissimo! A te fortuna non mancherà!*'

The woman did not let on that she knew how dreadful it sounded. She produced a small bottle from her sleeve and gave it to him, saying: 'A single drop, and you'll have a golden voice all day long.'

Gerrit laughed and said: 'Just one drop, while I've been drinking big glasses of beer to cheer me up?'

'It's enough for your entire life,' the woman said, 'but be careful not to waste it.'

And she put her hands back in her sleeves and disappeared in the dark alley.

Continuing his drunken medley of songs, Gerrit weaved his unsteady way home.

The next morning, as he picked his clothes up off the floor and the bottle slid out of his pants pocket, he remembered the nocturnal meeting. It can't have happened, he thought. One of my friends must have put the bottle in my pocket, and I dreamed the rest.

'Whatever,' he said hoarsely. 'I'll have a drop. Who knows, maybe it'll lubricate my poor dry throat.'

The fluid in the bottle was odour- and colourless, and when he let a drop slide over his tongue it seemed to be tasteless as well. His throat was just as dry as before, and his thirst was so great that he guzzled straight from the tap until he was gasping for breath. He did not look forward to his job in the big, crammed kitchen, the cook's pants he had to wear, the plastic-wrapped foodstuffs floating in boiling hot water, the odours that escaped when the bags were cut open. His stomach protested and he said: 'Oh, I shouldn't have drunk so much last night!'

He then looked around in surprise. Who had said that? Whose was that melodious voice?

'Was that me? Was that, is that my voice?'

And once again the gorgeous full baritone filled his room.

For the first time in his life Gerrit had the feeling that his chest was swelling and was actually a sound box. But his room was too small for all the sounds that were welling up within him, and he opened his window and let them take flight, clear and exceptionally beautiful: '*Deh, vieni alla fenestra ...*'

After this serenade he sang an exuberant aria. People stopped to listen, they applauded, they asked for more.

'Come on down,' shouted a man who had been a stagehand with the local opera company for the last thirty years. 'Come, and I'll guarantee you a bright future.'

That same afternoon Gerrit sang for the musical director, the artistic director, and the business manager; and that same week he stood in for Giovanni Terracini, who had broken an ankle while singing in *Tosca*, and Friedrich Bruno von Knabe, who had come down with hay fever just before the opening performance of *Die Meistersinger*.

It did not take long before he was in demand everywhere – Bayreuth, Milan, New York. People spent the night outside box offices and offered scalpers huge sums of money so they could be enchanted by his voice. *Rigoletto. Otello. Falstaff*. But also *Bluebeard's Castle, Wozzeck, L'Orfeo* and *La Damnation de Faust*, in which his performance as Mephistopheles was so overpowering that the audience wanted to sell him their souls en masse.

Even greater was the effect of his voice when he sang the title role in *Don Giovanni*. People almost fainted with delight, and when one evening he drank not one but several drops from the bottle, numerous women in the hall jumped to their feet, eager to throw themselves into the abyss with him.

One triumph followed another, and Gerrit couldn't get enough of it. But as his star rose, in so far as it could still rise, the bottom of the bottle came in sight, and one day he anxiously added a bit of water to the last drop.

Right in the middle of *Capriccio* his voice broke.

The newspapers reported that the demi-god had been brought low by a sudden throat infection, but when Gerrit woke up the following morning in his king-size hotel bed, he knew he had to return to his home town and would never enjoy the celebrity life again.

He started drinking, night after night. And one November evening, as a biting wind blew through the alley next to the girls' orphanage, the woman in the hooded coat came towards him for a second time.

'Oh,' he said, sobbing, 'I'll never sing again. So if you want to give me a bottle, please just make it beer. Or something stronger, something stronger would be okay, too.'

'You've been too greedy,' she said. But she was not insensitive to his tears, took another small bottle from her sleeve and said: 'This is for eternity. But you're going to need patience, and you're going to have to work hard.'

The next morning Gerrit unscrewed the top of the bottle and saw that it contained ink, pure, black India ink. He dipped his pen in it and began to write. He wrote about love and death, heaven and hell, poverty and riches, desire and drunkenness, about his childhood and his father, the piano tuner. And the people who read his stories said: 'Everything comes alive before your eyes. And it's beautifully written as well. I'll be damned if it isn't true, but sometimes it's just like the words are singing to you.' ■

Translated by Michiel Horn

Two Versions of Proceedings

For Herman Franke

1

As he locked his bike, his front wheel swung and touched hers. There was something intimate about it, would she notice? Don't get too close, she had said. Not too close: how did you judge the distance?

This street was quiet. The only noise was from a few houses along where there were building works, a whine as if iron or a hard type of stone were being ground. Once he was inside, in his own stairwell, not even this could be heard. He blinked momentarily at the dark and retrieved the paper and advertising brochures from the mat. He took the first steps cautiously, as if in a game without amusement: do I want to go upstairs? Yes, I do. No, I don't.

Had she heard him come home? Yes, she'd heard. No, she hadn't realised yet.

She worked half days, but perhaps she wasn't home yet. She might be at a friend's. Or in town. Recently she had started visiting her sister again, the sister who liked hearing things were going badly. He hadn't looked to see whether the car was there.

He stopped and it was as if he could hear his rapid heartbeat bouncing off the walls. He wondered whether his father had ever been in such doubt when he got home. Across the pavement between the playing children, past the box and hydrangeas in the front garden. A staircase was not the only thing that made footsteps heavier.

He could turn back. No. Yes. No, he wanted to go upstairs. Whatever she said, whatever she did.

Perhaps she had gone, really gone.

He climbed two more steps, closed his eyes and saw much more. An unaddressed envelope on his keyboard. Against the black pen tidy. In front of the books in one of the middle sections of his bookshelf. On a pile of books in the living room. On the table, in the place where his plate usually stood. Against the teapot. On the floor, right behind the sliding door, where their flat began.

The paper almost slipped out of his hands, one of the advertising brochures fell. He read:

For all your odd jobs: PERFECTO

Three more steps in the dark.

The door slid open and there she was with her flaming hair in an ambush of light.

2

Angry. Even as a child she had wondered why a single word could carry such weight. You look really angry. When someone said that, though she was just lost in thought or in a pleasant state of blankness, anger automatically came rushing along. Is something wrong? And she would make 'something' up. You look tired. And she would let her shoulders droop, and try to hide her face.

She had seen him cycle off this morning. He had a train to catch. Where to? A place she thought was in Brabant, but turned out to be in Noord-Holland. As soon as he was out of sight, she had called in sick. Sick. Another command, but she didn't give into it, she just had swollen eyes. Lie. A word to run away from.

She didn't run away. She went back to bed, fell asleep and was woken up by the sun on her face. She went round the flat, looked at the objects he loved and those they both loved or had acquired out of necessity. The oblong table could have been round, the floor not careful grey but red, or would that have made their rows fiercer? A question generated other questions, questions that tired you out. She took a small book out of his bookcase and sat down in his chair, leaning on the arms with her elbows. She leafed through the book. She read: 'One day soon he would reach her hiding place' and shivered. A line further on caught her eye: 'Even her pubic hair was orange.' And then: 'He had left a nice painting behind.'

She heard him locking his bike and went to the window. She saw him bend forward and pull his bike wheel clear of hers. Leave it, she wanted to call out to him when he bent over again. The wheel would not budge and after the fourth attempt he gave up.

It took him a long time to get upstairs. Had he turned back? Had he gone away again? She slide the gleaming white door open. She forgot everything she had wanted to say, and she did not hunt for words. 'I'm glad,' she said. 'I'm glad you're back.' ■

Translated by Paul Vincent