

## **TRANSLATED EXTRACTS FROM *DE NIEUWE RIVIER* BY EVA MEIJER**

Translation by Antoinette Fawcett

Page 24 (extract 1); pages 30-36 (extract 2); pages 84-86 (extract 3); pages 124-127.

*Note: A sample translation of the first chapter of The New River already exists, made for the Dutch publisher by a different translator. I have therefore not included the first chapter in this sample.*

The following extracts have been selected to enable the reader to make the acquaintance of various characters and to display different elements of the author's style and narrative technique.

The first extract is the whole of Chapter 2, a poem written by Hugo Frys, the soya-bean farmer whose murdered body was discovered in Chapter 1. The novel includes several of the poems in a notebook that had belonged to him. These poems round out his character and increase the sense of mystery that surrounds his death.

The second extract is the whole of Chapter 4. The British journalist, Janet Stone, who is investigating the appearance of a new river in an unnamed country in Latin America, has already been introduced in the first chapter. She was one of the first people to be confronted with the grisly sight of the murdered corpse of Mr Frys. In this chapter she meets Rafael Flores, the young geologist she has previously interviewed about the river, and shares the news about the murder with him. Together they visit the village mayor, Beatriz Diaz, to inform her about the incident. Marc, who is briefly mentioned in this chapter, is the husband of Janet Stone.

The third extract is the whole of Chapter 14 and describes Beatriz Diaz's relationship to the river, both in the past, when it made its sudden appearance, and in the present, as its power seems to be increasing. Dream and reality merge at the end of the chapter.

The fourth extract is taken from Chapter 22. It is a flashback to a shamanic ceremony which Rafael Flores attended and gives the reader more insight into his character and background. This chapter ends with a powerful and liberating vision.

*Extract 1* (p. 24 De nieuwe rivier)

## Chapter 2

### Brown VII

The light is brown here, in the early afternoon.  
Power is brown, wood too – so many colours of wood  
– and the houses at the forest's edge. The floor is brown.  
Your skin is brown, and your eyes, and so is your laugh.  
Brown is a colour that easily slips away  
from our attention. Brown is brown, we say, though  
we do distinguish between dark-brown and  
light-brown, or beige, and maybe call on  
the colour of nuts – hazelnut, almond – or dirty things  
but the brownness of brown is seldom discussed.

The margins of the riverbed are milky brown,  
not beige, but flatter, paler – red-brown  
tracks go along the bank, wind across the land  
to the horizon. Water-brown, not earth-brown.

A few weeks ago a young cinnamon-coloured  
bull got stuck in the mud. They managed to  
pull him out – it took hours. When he was finally freed  
he collapsed. The effort had worn him out.  
One of the lads rubbed him dry  
with dry grass.

Everything round here is made of leather: the boots, the hats,  
the sofas, the bridles, the bags, the men.

(The sound of horse's hooves is brown, the sound of applause and of castanets.)

Blend them.

## **Chapter 4**

‘Hey! Stop!’ Janet is about to turn onto the main road when an old green Volkswagen driven by a dark-skinned man comes along. It’s the geologist she interviewed yesterday about the river, in the Sweet Innocence café. He speaks English and so she can converse completely normally with him. She beeps her horn.

Rafel brakes. He rubs his neck. Last night he dreamed that the hand of death was touching him. The hand of death was an old woman’s hand, wrinkled, dark-veined and free-floating. There was no arm attached to it. The hand felt icy cold in his neck and touched him only briefly, but throughout the whole dream he could sense its coldness. He knew at once that it was the hand of death. It couldn’t be anything else. The dream went with him into the day and his neck still feels sensitive where the hand touched it.

Janet parks the jeep by the side of the road and gets out. ‘Mr Flores? Rafel?’ She is really pleased to see him. She picks up her bottle of water and takes a few sips. A rickety mini-bus drives around her vehicle and onto the track. That’ll be the farm workers – there were seven yesterday, according to what she counted.

Rafel winds down his window and forces a smile. ‘What’s up?’ He’s on his way to see the Mayor and in fact he’s too late already. She has invited him to advise her about the river. Because its course is constantly changing, they can’t build bridges across it and this creates real social problems. Take the Gonzalez family, for instance, whose eldest daughter now lives to the east of the river, while the rest of the family lives on its west side. She has to walk half an hour before reaching a place where the river is shallow enough to wade across; in the past it was just a seven-minute walk. Her mother has dementia and her father is disabled. She can shout across to them, but she can’t change their bed. The river has created problems for many of the small farmers too. The Lorca family, who live at the end of the tarmac track, can’t reach their cattle anymore without a canoe and Mario Rio’s coffee plants have twice been lost to the rising waters.

‘Mr Frys is dead.’

‘What?’

Rafel had been at the soya-bean farmer's only last week to study the soil on the east side of the river. Something really interesting is going on there: there's ocean sand under the silt, although the river has spontaneously sprung up from the earth.

'I've just been there. He was hanging from the ceiling.'

'Oh God.' He claps his hands three times, quickly and softly. The police officer did that too when he saw the corpse. It's like making the sign of the cross.

Janet tells Rafel what she saw, including the fact that Frys was naked. After all, you can't keep those details secret.

'Strung up by the feet?' Rafel frowns. 'What a strange death. Had he... you know...' He hesitates a moment.

'Been doing kinky sex? Who knows?'

He laughs. 'Yeah, that's right.'

One third of all hanged men get an erection after dying. In the past Christ on the cross was often represented like this – the Catholic church tried to destroy such images, or at least hide them away, but it didn't entirely succeed in suppressing them. This phenomenon is something that has also been studied in animal tests.

'It's the curse of the river, I suppose,' she says.

He gives her a searching look. 'I'm on my way to see Mayor Diaz. She should be informed about this. Will you come with me? Then I'll bring you right back here.'

Compared to most of the gardens in Coral Tree, Beatriz Diaz's garden is exceptionally lushly planted, with trees Janet has never seen before, and shrubs covered in pastel-coloured flowers. Against the house there are climbing plants with heart-shaped leaves and a large cactus to the right of the path leading to the front door bears a single orange flower. Such frivolous flowers always look out of place amongst the scaly green. Two hummingbirds land on the stone patio in front of the kitchen window and fly up again immediately, incomprehensible messengers of something higher.

Rafel gives three quick knocks on the front door and then opens it.

'Frys is dead,' he says. 'And she's seen him.'

He points at Janet.

'What?' Beatriz stands up at the table. 'When?' She clutches onto the tabletop for support.

Janet steps forward and holds out her hand. 'I'm Janet Stone, from *The Guardian*. We've already been in touch.'

Beatriz shakes Janet's hand. 'What's happened? Have the police been called?'

They follow Beatriz inside the house.

‘I should phone Jor. Who found him?’ Beatriz looks at Janet’s face. She sees a neurotic woman, good-looking by current standards, but ephemeral, and thin as a whippet.

‘Petronella.’

‘Poor Hugo.’ Beatriz sits down and then stands up again. ‘Sorry. Would you like coffee? Or tea?’ There are homemade cookies on the table – red, double lozenges sandwiched together with the thick caramel paste they’re so crazy about round here.

She doesn’t like the coffee – it tastes like instant and it’s too weak – but the sugar does Janet good. She takes a second biscuit without asking while Rafel says what he knows.

Janet gets her notebook. ‘Had you known Mr Frys for a long time? Have you any idea why someone might murder him? Did he have enemies? Is it something to do with his business?’ Her hands are still shaking a little.

Marc hadn’t called back, so she rang Boris, her editor, who was immediately full of enthusiasm for the murder. That would spice up the story about the river. *Guardian* readers know enough about climate issues already, but human suffering will always pique their interest.

‘But didn’t you come here to write about the river?’ Beatriz is holding the cookie plate under Janet’s nose. She takes another one. ‘Mr Frys was a quiet man who minded his own business. He settled down here thirty years ago. No, it’s nearly thirty-five years now. A large part of the forest had already been cleared. He finished that and started working in the soya business.’

‘Which didn’t please the environmental activists,’ Rafel said. ‘Monoculture exhausts the soil.’

Beatriz gives him an irritated look. ‘They planted a flag on his land,’ she says to Janet. ‘A few weeks ago. With an image of the earth being washed away by a river and crying out for help.’

‘Who are the activists?’

‘That’s something we don’t know,’ Beatriz says.

‘Janet and I were saying in the car that the land should really be returned to the wild,’ Rafel says.

He always makes Beatriz think of the statue of Apollo at the bottom of her garden, which has something simultaneously arrogant and innocent about it. ‘Frys has only just died,’ she says.

Rafel tries not to sound too enthusiastic. ‘But it’s important to get ahead of foreign investors. We could designate it as an area for scientific research and then look at how long it takes for the soil to renew itself. That sometimes happens quicker than you’d think. The earth is resilient.’

‘Perhaps there’s an heir, someone who’ll want to take over the business,’ Beatriz says. She thinks about Frys. He had a feeling for life, for melancholy, for time that has passed already and time that is yet to pass. He wasn’t a friend, but he was a part of her life.

Janet makes a note. ‘Look for the heir.’ Below that she writes: ‘Mayor Diaz’s house looks like the house of a flamboyant aunty, with handmade wall hangings, paraphernalia from the seventies, health sandals, and homemade cookies. Mayor Diaz herself looks like an ageing hippy, in silver leggings and an oversized tie-dye top. Once she fought for women’s rights and indigenous land rights. Now she’s a village mayor.’

Janet asks Beatriz if she’s still an activist.

Beatriz shakes her head. ‘The people here wanted me to be their mayor and that’s good because it’s very quiet here. Nothing happens anymore.’ She glances briefly at Rafel who is thinking about the former regime, just as she is.

The regime, a dictatorship headed by Jean-Marie Mora, or Mora the Mighty (also, in whispers, called Mora the Mad), was overthrown almost twenty years ago in a coup led by the People’s Army. The army then called elections and there’s been a democratic government ever since, in theory at least. In actuality, there’s hardly any less corruption in many places, and it’s not clear how much influence the former masters still exercise behind the scenes, or where they’ve gone. A few regional leaders were brought to justice, but all the big fish escaped. Sergeant Sotos, who ruled the roost in St. Frank, has vanished.

Rafel starts talking again about the chance this gives them, but Beatriz cuts him off. He takes a big gulp of coffee.

Janet asks a few more questions about Mr Frys, but they can’t tell her much more about him, or don’t want to tell her.

‘Wouldn’t it be better to talk to Petronella?’ Beatriz asks.

‘She was much too upset,’ Janet says. She turns to Rafel. ‘Why don’t we go and take a look at the farm? Perhaps the police officers have discovered something already.’

## Chapter 14

In the middle of the night a gust of cold wind wakes Beatriz. She doesn't move – is someone there? Is the door open? The sheets feel warm, a skin of cloth over her own skin. The window at the front of the house has blown open and there's a strong wind. The wooden floor is just as warm as the sheets. How can it be so warm when the wind is blowing like this? She looks out of the window – the river water seems to have risen again. First, she looked out onto an exhausted forest, then eroded meadowlands, and now the river, which at one and the same time radiates futility and resoluteness.

The grass below her is a pale yellow, the moonlight artificial and glaring, like winter evening lights on a junior sportsground. To the left is the road, to the right the new watercourse. Her nana would long since have organized a ceremony for the river, to neutralize it, to propitiate the ancestors. But she allows it simply to meander and hasn't even made an altar for it. Waiting to see what will happen is a mark of respect, she tells herself – she's old enough to know that whatever happens had to happen, and that what has to happen will happen.

Bobo, the white angora cat who wandered into her life one day twelve years ago, grubby and without a history, jumped up onto her bed to wake her on the night the river appeared. She heard it before she saw it: thundering in the distance, like an avalanche, a highway, rushing, rumbling, a low-flying plane. She walked across the wet grass in her bedroom slippers. Less than two metres away from her fence, the water was opening up the earth, gushing a gully for itself. Bobo stayed in the doorway, pricking his ears. She already knew how strong water is, but was still dumbfounded: she was witnessing a birth, and just as with other births she couldn't sleep at all for the rest of the night.

She closes the window, and back in her bed she almost immediately falls asleep.

In her dream the river is an enormous brown snake winding its way past her house. Beatriz knows she's dreaming and decides to follow the dream.

The snake doesn't seem aware of her presence and carries on sliding across the land. She is so long that Beatriz can't see where she begins or ends. On Mr. Frys' land, where the first beans are already hanging from the soya plants, the snake crushes them under her belly, row



after row, until the only thing left standing is the square-shaped house. The snake coils her body around the house, tighter and tighter. Beatriz sees Mr Frys, his naked body hanging upside down from the ceiling. He didn't recognize the curse of the river, he just accepted its appearance as you accept the names of cities in school geography lessons. Small brown snakes are slithering down from his nostrils and then out of his ears and his eyes. Then she can no longer see where they're coming from, his whole body is covered in them. They're streaming towards the front door and out of the house, which is surrounded by water, because they come from the water and unto the water they will one day return.

#### *Extract 4*

From Chapter 22 (pp. 124-127)

It was dusky inside the tent. In its centre there were eight thin mattresses, set in a circle. Next to each of these there was a chamber pot ('For when you need to vomit,' Wotko whispered) and a carafe of water. Once his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, he could see the designs along the edge of the tent's roof: men who were half-bird, horses riding on dragons, and firebirds with cactuses and lapa flowers growing from their backs.

At the centre of the tent a red circle had been drawn on the ground. Rafel stayed there, standing inside it, until Wotko laughingly tugged him away. 'That's for the healer. He's the only one who can stand there. Come along.' He took him by the sleeve and coaxed him away, then got him to lie down on a mat with a green blanket and lay down on the mat beside him. Other people came into the tent. They spoke in subdued tones and all remained standing a while to let their eyes get accustomed to the darkness and because they didn't exactly know what they were meant to do. Wotko's cousin was the last to enter. He said they were on the verge of stepping into another world. Just as with a real birth that would be accompanied by friction. The participants, his guests, should let it flow over them, open themselves up to it and not be afraid.

After that it was silent for some time. Everyone was waiting to see what would happen, but didn't know what he was waiting for. He: there were no women present. That was a coincidence, Wotko told him later. Women are just as welcome.

When the healer arrived, Rafel was already half asleep. It had been a long week: first he'd had exams for three days in a row and then he had to help one of the professors with fieldwork in the wetlands. When the chanting started he jumped upright – perhaps it wasn't a chant but a poem; perhaps it wasn't a poem but a prayer. He drank the liquid in one go – it was even more disgusting than people said. All around him he heard people getting hold of the chamber pots, emptying out their stomachs. And then the cactus came.

The cactus swelled up in his chest. He felt its spines prickle against the inside of his skin, till they shot right through it – it didn't hurt but gave him an incredible feeling of liberation. Inside his body the cactus took on his form – every little part of him was filled with it, down

to the tips of his toes. The cactus spines carried on growing, swift as a deer in flight, more sensitive than fingertips, more sensitive than a crocodile's skin. He felt the air, the thick hot desert air beneath his spines, and his spines became the strings of a musical instrument and brought forth the most beautiful melody he had ever heard. I never knew I was so musical, he thought, before his thoughts vanished, merging into the music. He contained the whole land, the whole unhappy land, healed the broken hearts, the fault-lines of history. Then the land contained him, held him in a hand that was landscape – he saw the lifelines on its palm from very close by, he saw from his own feet that he was still young, a child. A child in the hand of his country and everyone was singing to him. The melody was not as lovely as the song he himself had sung, but it was just as familiar. He was safe. They loved him. He grew up, unfolding like a meadow breeze in the morning, saw Wotko get up and wanted to go to him, but Wotko waved him off – just stay where you are, he seemed to say, we'll see each other soon. Now his body was the instrument, not with spines or strings but warmer and bigger and more full of love than ever. This was love, not the inadequate emotion that went with his lost loves: this was only warmth and completeness, everything belonged to him and he belonged to everything, and he was so big and so small and he understood that it didn't matter – being big and especially not being small, because everything is everything. He was a cloud, visible but ungraspable. He was the sun. And just at the point that everything turned too hot, too yellow, the river came. Brown and winding, it wriggled a way for itself through the land, the dry land. He was the river, he was a snake that split the land in two and he felt the earth on his belly, the liberation of finally taking revenge for the exploitation, the repudiation, the hatred he had felt all his life – which was never made explicit but was always somewhere there in the background, in his father's curt sentences and his mother's turned-away face, in Estela's disappointment, in the teachers who thought he was stupid because he kept himself concealed, because he had grown used to making himself invisible, to being in the background, like the land. He broke it open. He broke the silence. He streamed.