

The Flood - Mariët Meester - novel

Translation: Stacey Knecht

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Original title in Dutch: De overstroming

1st edition 2003, Uitgeverij Meulenhoff, ISBN: 9789029073127

2nd edition 2020, Uitgeverij Caprae, ISBN: 9789083108407



Introduction

A young woman from Amsterdam has withdrawn to her old wooden gypsy caravan on a 'terp' in the Dutch polder area. She wants to be alone for a week, completely alone, so she has even draped a cloth over her mirror.

On the terp are five other people: a farmer and his sister named Brother en Sis, a young couple from Rotterdam, and an aggressive milking-machine dealer, whom the protagonist secretly refers to as 'the Hawker.' He lives at the foot of the terp in a modern caravan and has parked a flatbed in her yard, just to annoy her.

After exceptionally heavy rains, it appears that the entire polder is flooded. The water is just below the edge of the terp. For an entire day and night, the young woman assumes that the other five are already gone, that they left before the rains began.

This is the point at which the translated excerpt from The Flood begins. The novel was first published in 2003 by publisher J.M. Meulenhoff and recently reprinted by the small Dutch publisher Caprae. The novel is more topical than ever. The characters in The Flood are confronted with a radical curtailment of their living

environment: the ultimate lockdown. They must find a way to cope -- with each other, especially -- and they have no idea how it will end. How do people react to difficult circumstances? And might the flooding be related to climate change, in a country already largely below sea level? In a contemporary variant of the Flood Myth, Mariët Meester writes with dry humor about the human will to survive. A grim but moving story unfolds, in which the fellow survivors gradually realize that they cannot live without each other.

Excerpt

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Ever since I was thirteen, I've had the habit of fiddling with my hair when I'm worried about something. After discovering that I was the only one left on the terp, that I'd have to manage on my own on a dry mound in a vast expanse of water, I pulled the cloth off the big mirror and saw my reflection. My head was an almost inextricable mass of tangles.

'Everything will be fine,' I told myself. 'Just go raid the Spijkers' freezer. Once you've done that, a helicopter will come rescue you.'

'But you haven't seen any helicopters, you haven't seen anything in the sky, not even a glider,' my reflection answered, 'even though there's that little airport right nearby. The sky is empty, strangely empty. And there's more and more junk floating in the water. Something serious is going on.'

'So you just build a boat.'

'And where will you go?'

'Oh, somewhere,' I said out loud, then jumped with fright at the sound of someone pounding on the door, on the other side of the mirror.

I'm saved! was my first thought, but before I could think any more about it I heard Brother's voice. Are you in there? There's been a flood.'

'Yes, I noticed,' I answered.

'Can I come in?'

I let him into the wagon and asked if he wanted coffee. He brought with him the familiar smell of manure and milk. As he sat with his knees clamped together on my red velvet sofa, plucking at the tufts of filling from his jacket the way I'd been plucking at my hair moments before, I boiled water over the wood stove and spooned coffee into the filter. I purposely took my time, hoping the visit would last for a while.

'There's been a flood,' Brother said again, after his first sip of coffee. He began whimpering, like an animal driven into a corner. I felt tears welling in my own eyes. For five, maybe ten minutes, we each gave way to the self-pity that can be such a relief, although I suspected that for Brother, it was more than self-pity. 'Willem, Willem,' I thought I heard him say. It was the name of his dead brother.

Over the second cup of coffee, he told me that all the others were still on the terp. Just as I had thought earlier, the Hawker, in a panic, had driven up to the farmhouse in the middle of the flood night, by which time the water had already reached the tops of his wheels. After the wind had shifted their trailer several feet to one side, with them still in it, the couple from Rotterdam had also fled to the farmhouse. Later, the trailer was completely wrecked and blown off the terp. No one was hurt, except Sis, who had been hit in the shoulder by a roof tile. Brother said that the roof of the barn had been only partly blown away, on the side I couldn't see from here. Several of the cows had been standing in the rain for hours. That was why he had come to me, because of the cows, they were thirsty, the taps were dry, I had those rain barrels, could I give him my water?

So not only wasn't there any electricity, there was no water either. After a moment's thought I said, as coolly as possible, 'There's plenty of water. Why not just let a bucket down on a rope?'

'Already tried. They won't swill the stuff. Too salty.'

The word 'swill' had been used on the terp ever since the arrival of the Hawker. It was just the trigger I needed to keep me from changing my mind. 'Aren't there any puddles in the yard? See if the cows will drink those up first.'

Brother took a last gulp of coffee and left. I was so upset that I walked back and forth, biting my nails, from my workroom to my bed and my bed to my workroom. There was no water coming out of the taps. The cows had nothing to drink, our situation was far more serious than I had realized. I still had my jerrycan, the others probably had the Rotterdammers' water barrel, but in a week? Maybe they weren't even planning to use my rainwater for the cows, they were usually never this concerned about the well-being of the cattle. I would defend my rain barrels to the last drop.

On the iron bar of the flatbed I saw two herons, one on either side. Distinguished gentlemen in grey three-piece suits, I always think whenever I see herons, but now there was no room in my head for such observations. I hurried to the sink, pushed aside the little curtain underneath it and grabbed one of the jars of homemade plum compote I had stored there, next to the butane gas canister. There were thirty of them. It was the first plum compote I had ever made, which was why the first five jars were fairly bitter: I didn't yet know that this kind of plum had to be peeled before cooking. I had put labels on all the jars, with the dates. Now I chose one of the newest ones and, in protest against I didn't know who or what, I wolfed down the whole thing. I refused to be sensible.

So we were surrounded by water, and at the same time we didn't have enough. I was the only one with a supply of drinkable water. I could always sell it to them, say, a liter for a kilo of meat. After all, those hunks of meat in their freezer must've been thawing out by now. Or should I suggest that in exchange for water the flatbed be removed and my garden restored to the way it used to be? That they repair the fence and set it back upright? The rainwater definitely gave me an

advantage, but for how long? They might band together and steal my water in the middle of the night. Even with my vacuum cleaner tube, I was no match for them.

I began debating with myself about whether I should saw off some willow branches, as weapons. If I whipped them around, it might scare the others away. No, I thought, I had to try and get the rain barrels into the wagon, there was a good, strong lock on the door, the barrels were safest inside. One barrel held two hundred and twenty-five liters; how was I going to do this? I had to find a way to transfer the water into something else. I had the sink, a laundry bucket, three pans, a kettle, a load of empty bottles, and an assortment of glasses and bowls, even plates might work. I could also get the bucket from the outhouse. The rain barrels were full to the brim, four times two hundred and twenty-five liters was nine hundred liters.

I tried to get the knots out of my hair with a coarse-toothed comb. It hurt. I pulled harder. I *wanted* it to hurt. There was another knock at the door. ‘Yes?’ I shouted. My voice sounded strange.

Once again, it was Brother. He poked his head timidly around the door and said, ‘You sure you won’t give us any rainwater? I promised Sis and the others I’d ask.’

They were still using the weakest among them as a go-between. ‘I need it myself,’ I said. ‘Sorry. Hey, come in for a minute.’

After Brother had installed himself on the sofa, where he had left behind a vague, butt-sized stain the first time he came over, I considered quickly locking the door. Then I could use him as a hostage, it might give me more leverage. But I immediately dismissed that idea. Brother may not have been strong mentally, but he was a big, sturdy guy, hardened by wind and weather. He could easily overpower me, and my precious water supply would be gone in no time.

‘What actually happened, with Willem I mean?’ I heard myself saying. Brother began crying again; his body shook violently, as if he was having an epileptic fit. When he finally managed to get up from the sofa and walk to the door of the wagon, he looked ten years older.

‘Your satellite dish, does it still work? Can you watch TV?’ I asked him.

‘Blew away. We found it again, but it was broken.’

As I watched Brother traipsing back to the farmhouse, his shoulders drooping, I spoke sternly to myself. ‘Enough is enough, you have to change your attitude. This is an emergency. It’s important to be on your very best behavior, if only for the sake of self-preservation. You’ve got no choice, you need to make friends.’

And so it happened that, after lying face down on my bed for at least an hour thinking about this new mindset, I pulled on my coat and went with Brother to the barn when he came by for the third time to ask for rainwater. If the cows were really that thirsty, I wanted to see for myself. There must’ve been plenty of puddles in the yard, after the past few days of rain. In the barn, too. At least, if it was true that half the roof had caved in.

We walked along side by side. There was a gentle breeze. I heard birds, lots of them. Brother looked down at the ground, while I kept an eye out for angry swans, because in keeping with my changed attitude I'd decided to leave the vacuum cleaner tube in the wagon. All I saw was a hare, hopping across the concrete path on too high, too skinny legs, like a deformed rabbit.

Brother stomped through a puddle in his clogs and, moments later, without thinking, through another one. No, don't say a word, I instructed myself. Don't say that the cows could've drunk from that puddle. New attitude, best behavior, open mind. 'So, how many liters does a cow drink?' I asked.

He trudged on and didn't even seem to hear me. 'Look,' he said in a tired voice, when we had reached the double door at the back of barn. Or at least, what had been a double door. Only the left-hand door was still on its hinges, the other lay flat on the ground. That side had no hinges left at all, there wasn't even a doorframe, the whole wall was gone, and what had once been the rear of the barn was now a pile of roof tiles and chunks of cemented brick. Part of the right-hand wall had collapsed, too. 'Inside,' all the cows were chained to the only wall of the barn that was still intact. As for the roof, Brother hadn't been exaggerating; it was a miracle that not a single animal had been hurt. The right side of the roof had been blown away to reveal the rafters, some of which now stuck straight up, while others dangled in midair. Shreds of blue plastic hung from the broken beams; Brother and Sis must've tried to devise a makeshift rainscreen.

I didn't say anything. Brother did, but I couldn't understand him, because the moment they saw us the cows had started mooing. Usually I love the noises cows make when they're in their stalls, the rattling of their chains, their rhythmical chewing and re-chewing, occasionally interrupted by a rising belch or a slow, melancholy bellowing with the strength of a foghorn. But this sounded even sadder, like a piece of music in a minor key, a chorus of deep, atonal basses. Because of the rain that had fallen inside, the animals were standing in a thick layer of muck, but that couldn't have been the only reason they were mooing like that, they must've really been thirsty, maybe even hungry. There was hay on the ground within their reach, but I didn't see a single one of them eating it.

'They're not eating!' Brother yelled in my ear.

'I can see that!' I yelled back, after a brief silence. I couldn't think up anything more helpful.

'Need water first!'

'How much?'

'What?'

'How much water do they need?'

'Three buckets a head, at least!'

Three buckets, if I had understood him correctly. Three buckets times twelve cows: that was thirty-six buckets of water. One bucket held seven, maybe eight liters, I worked out, so a single round of water was thirty-six times seven, which meant two hundred and fifty liters,

twenty-five liters more than the contents of one rain barrel. It had been my urban idiocy to think that the water in the puddles would be enough for the cows; a large puddle wouldn't even be enough for a calf for one day.

'And the water from the flood?' I tried again, to make sure.

'Too salty!'

The mooing continued, incessantly. I shuddered. It was a desperate plea, an appeal for compassion. But I couldn't just give away my rainwater: people went first. Still, the situation wasn't going to be over any time soon. We had to try and find a better solution.

'We have to talk about this!' As I shouted, my lips accidentally touched Brother's ear. There were coarse hairs along the edge. The ear itself was very soft, and suddenly I felt like crying again.

Brother didn't notice that my mouth had touched him, or at least pretended not to have noticed. He simply made a movement with his head, which I interpreted as 'Come with me.' As the infernal chorus swelled, I followed him, stepping over the broken door and into the barn, looking out for possible falling roof tiles or pieces of wooden beam. When we reached the hallway between the barn and the kitchen, Brother removed his clogs and I pulled off my rubber boots. 'Is it okay that some of the cows are all wet from the rain?' I asked. 'Won't they catch cold?'

He shrugged. 'Nope, doesn't bother 'em.'

I kept my coat on, and so did Brother. We walked into the kitchen in our stockinged feet. At the table with the red-and-white checked oilcloth sat Sis, the Hawker, and next to him the female half of the couple from Rotterdam, with a white lace cloth over her hair. She and Sis answered my 'Hi, everybody' with reasonable courtesy, but the Hawker just stared into the glass he was holding and said nothing. The women both had a half-full glass in front of them. On the table were several open bottles of orange soda, a few torn packages of almond cookies and a pile of potato chips that had been dumped out of their bag.

Brother sank down in his usual chair, with his back to the counter, on one long side of the table.

'And?' Sis asked him.

A grunt, which undoubtedly meant 'Nope.'

The Hawker grunted too, but more loudly.

'Oh,' said Sis, disappointed. All the same, she pulled up an extra chair. I hesitated, then sat down. Sis stood up to get a clean glass from the counter. She took a new bottle of orange soda out of a plastic crate and set it down in front of me. I don't really like orange soda, or almond cookies for that matter, but now I was more than happy to accept both. I was just reaching for the soda bottle so I could fill my glass, when the Hawker snatched it away and put it down on the floor next to his chair. 'No water for the cows, no soda for the yuppies.'

No one moved or said a word, not even Sis. I waited to see what would happen. Nothing did. Everyone and everything seemed to have come to a standstill. The clock on the wall had stopped because of the

power shortage, but it must've been almost five minutes before I got up the nerve to ask Sis, 'How's your shoulder? Brother told me you got hit by a roof tile.'

She glanced at the Hawker, as if she needed his permission before she could answer me. He was scowling into his orange soda again. She took a chance. 'Not too bad. Still hurts, but it could've been a lot worse.'

'You were bleeding like a sieve,' the Hawker muttered.

'Anyway, Josje put a band-aid on it and it was fine.'

Josje, my back neighbor. 'Where's your fiancé, by the way?' I asked her as lightly as possible, while the thought suddenly occurred to me: is that bastard out there stealing my water?'

'Rob went to get help,' she answered in her thick Rotterdam accent. I couldn't believe it. 'Get help? Where?'

'At least Rob's not as anti-social as you, Princess Amsterdam,' I heard from above the Hawker's glass.

I forced myself to focus on Josje. Since the Hawker was sitting right next to her, chair to chair, it took some effort. I had never seen her this close up before. Her features were more delicate than I had expected. Brother had told me she and I were nearly the same age, but that couldn't be right, she must've been much younger. Her skin was flawless, not a wrinkle or a spot, but it was her eyes that struck me most: they were an extraordinary lavender blue. With that lace veil over her hair, she looked like a bride. 'How is he going to get help? Isn't that much too dangerous?'

'His Lordship here said it was safe,' she said.

His Lordship? Who did she mean, the Hawker? Did she not get along with him either? I had always assumed that the Hawker and the Rotterdammers were the best of friends.

'So... so His Lordship said it was safe.'

'Shut up, woman.'

I kept looking into those violet eyes. 'How is Rob going for help?'

'In the canoe.'

'Jesus, the canoe... Wouldn't it have been better if he'd waited a few days? That's taking a huge risk! Does he even know *how* to canoe?'

'You're starting to get on my nerves, is what you're doing!'

Just ignore him, I said to myself, keep on talking to Josje.

'According to *him*,' she nodded toward the Hawker, 'it's an expensive canoe, the best there is. You know, it's the red one that was always lying at the bottom of the terp. Rob's a strong guy, he works on the docks.' She looked at her watch. 'He left an hour and a half ago.'

She was feeling anxious, I could tell. I myself hadn't even noticed him leave, I was probably lying on my bed thinking things over.

'What about you?' I asked Brother. 'Did you think he should go?'

Sis answered for him. 'It looked pretty calm, and the wind was right.'

'Wasn't hardly any wind at all. I'll bet Rob's nearly in Utrecht by now,' Brother added. This seemed to clear the air, and the five of us got

into a discussion about the cause of the flood, about how and when it had begun and, more importantly, when it would end. In two and a half days, was the average of all our opinions combined. I thought seven, I was sure this would last at least a week, but the Hawker's 'one day' and 'one day' from Josje brought that down to three. Brother and Sis figured we'd probably be isolated up here for another two days and that the flood would be over the day after tomorrow. All four of them thought I was being far too pessimistic, everything would be fine.

'But if it's only going to last a few more days, why didn't you wait to send Rob for help?'

'Listen to her, all cry and no wool!'

In the course of our discussion, when someone suggested that the flood had been caused by environmental problems, the Hawker claimed that the environment had nothing to do with it. In fact, he said, the whole 'global heating thing' was a complete exaggeration. A niece of his never took the bus anymore, she did everything by bike, because of the environment. She obviously forgot about all those bike factories! And by the way, didn't you yuppies just buy an old gas guzzler? I couldn't deny that, though he would've been amazed at the price we had paid for that 'old gas guzzler,' classic sports cars like ours were very much in demand. But okay, 'global heating,' or maybe it was the damn Krauts again, always so full of themselves, even their *rivers* were too full, or those bureaucratic bloodsuckers in the Hague, who were too stingy to pay for dike repairs on the other side of the country. Or could it be that the water was coming from up north, from Friesland for instance? Maybe the dike wardens up there had been caught off guard. There had been a storm warning on the radio, we'd all heard it. But after that, the radios went dead. Sis had climbed on top of the tractor several times to try and get a signal. The storm they had predicted must've been the main cause of the flood, we were all convinced of that. But in combination with some disaster on the North Sea, said the Hawker, or a terrorist attack even farther away, in Iceland or Greenland, or maybe Alaska or some other part of America. Those wanderers in their long dresses were capable of anything, they could even melt the ice caps. And no, it wasn't a volcanic eruption on the Canary Islands, you didn't even have volcanoes there.

After an increasingly furious exchange, which I only later realized was a typically Dutch attempt at crisis management, a way of getting a grip on the situation by exploring, elucidating, and encircling the problem, the Hawker yelled that I was a spoiled bitch. What had started out as a discussion had become a shouting match between the Hawker and me, while the three others sat in silence, polishing off the potato chips, almond cookies, and soda. I still hadn't been offered any.

'You probably thought I was *scared* when I had to drive up here, didn't you?' yelled the Hawker. 'Well, Princess Amsterdam, I even brought up the damn *canoe*!' he added, with a look of defiance. He was a character, and under ordinary circumstances I might even have seen the humor in it. But these were no ordinary circumstances.

When the last silence had fallen in the discussion, Brother went outside with his binoculars. He came back with the announcement that there were people sitting on the roof of the women's prison in Nieuwersluis. We all went out to have a look. He was right: through the lenses of the binoculars I could see at least twenty people sitting and standing on the prison roof. They had a white flag. The Hawker thought someone was waving it, but it looked to me as if they had attached it to a kind of pole. It was probably just the wind.

Back in the kitchen, Josje said that the people on the roof might decide to build a raft and float across to the terp, in search of food and shelter. Then we'd be stuck up here with a bunch of crooks, because after the military offenders and rejected asylum seekers, Nieuwersluis was once again being used for ordinary criminals, all female. This led to a whole new discussion, during which the Hawker said he bet there'd be some 'hot babes up there,' but in the end we all agreed to warn each other immediately if we saw a makeshift raft full of prisoners drifting towards us. As soon as they actually tried to land on the terp, we'd run out and push it away.

No, these were no ordinary circumstances.

The press on *The Flood*

- Mariët Meester has written an entertaining, suspenseful variation on what television does with this theme in survival shows like *Expedition Robinson* and *Temptation Island*. But different. More fun. More exciting. More amusing. Deadlier. More terrifying.
Koen Eykhout in *De Limburger*

- The characters feel each other out, are forced to put aside their differences and get organized. (...) And, surprisingly, the little utopia appears to function.
Karel Osstyn in *De Standaard*

- Mariët Meester's novel deals with issues at the core of our society. Her message (...) is an optimistic one: when it comes down to it, people can change and, like willow branches, are filled with unexpected new life.
Wim Vogel in the *Haarlems Dagblad*

- Written with great tragicomic ingenuity.
Janet Luis in *Opzij*

- It remains curious that Mariët Meester's *The Flood* (...) was overlooked in the distribution of literary prizes.
Joep van Ruiten in *Dagblad van het Noorden*

- Just as the biblical Flood story was meant to point out man's smallness and vulnerability, Mariët Meester's *The Flood* describes the dilemmas of contemporary man: how to survive in a threatened environment. (...) On the surface, this is a compelling work of fiction. But 'still waters run deep,' and, below the surface, *The Flood* reveals quite a few surprising aspects of human nature. Gradually, a beautiful, symbolic tale unfolds about pride and dependence, autonomy and surrender. It is as if the water, after long hesitation, washes away all scruples, and the unusual nature of the situation also leads to a strange sexual constellation. (...) Undoubtedly, the novel's greatest strength lies in its masterful, deceptively realistic style.
Linde Roels in *De leeswolf*

About the author



Mariët Meester grew up in the prison village of Veenhuizen, which at the time was forbidden to outsiders. She studied at the Academy of Visual Arts in Groningen. After a period as a visual artist and freelance journalist, her first literary work, the novel *Sevillana*, was published in 1990. Since then she has published thirteen titles, both fiction and literary non-fiction. She also writes essays and opinion pieces for the national Dutch daily newspaper *NRC*. Her work has been translated into several languages, including Russian and Spanish. Following the publication of her non-fiction book *The Mythical Uncle*, she wrote an essay for *Asymptote*, translated into English by Stacey Knecht as 'The Protagonist.'

www.marietmeester.nl

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The translation of this excerpt has been made possible by a financial contribution from the Dutch Foundation for Literature.