

Guest of Honour 2.0

The Low Countries at Frankfurt Book Fair 2016

On the final day of 2014 I receive a text message from Ine, my right hand on the team for Frankfurt Book Fair 2016, the year in which Flanders and the Netherlands are to be the Guest of Honour. She's staying in Cadzand and writes that she often thinks of Frankfurt there at the seaside.

How can you think of a city of skyscrapers while leaning into the sea wind, you might ask? It makes perfect sense to me.

As with the rest of the team, everything I've heard and seen recently breathes 2016, Frankfurt or the Buchmesse. Everything but everything points towards the vision I'm developing of Flanders and the Netherlands as Guest of Honour.

Ine mentions in passing that water takes a long time to form a wave. Once a wave has been formed, it rises up, gaining strength, only to break immediately afterwards. This observation probably came to her on a beach walk. One wave elicits another. I want to add in my message that it's all beautiful: the approaching end and impending beginning,

decline and growth, the peace which sets in, with another movement expanding. Simply put, the game the sea plays with the beach.

All storytellers know they must avoid harmony if they want to keep things interesting. People are far more intrigued by action and reaction than by harmony. Harmony won't have us sitting on the edges of our seats.

My basic idea for the Netherlands and Flanders as Guest of Honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair is the wave, a simple, familiar image, but at the same time rich and sparkling. There's a great deal more significance to a wave than just a bit of foam.

Flemish and Dutch people share a language. That's interesting, but for a foreign country it's hardly the most exciting thought. Sharing a language sounds like being becalmed at sea, and I'm not going to opt for calm when it comes to Frankfurt Book Fair 2016.

Flanders and the Netherlands are the first countries to take their place as European Guest of Honour for the second time, having first shared that honour in 1993. With that first time in mind, the wave metaphor stayed with me when it occurred to me that the Netherlands and Flanders



share not only a language but also the North Sea. We have already made our big entrance together once, and since then a great deal has happened.

Harry Mulish and Hugo Claus have died and new names have entered the scene. The book industry has changed. In 2014 the Frankfurt Book Fair expressly requested that in 2016 we present not just our literature but our entire culture. Flanders and the Netherlands must be the Guest of Honour 2.0. Two point oh.

All well and good. I'll go into details when and where I know them. It's as simple as that.

One wave elicits another.

We might hope that the world has seen the changes in Flanders and the Netherlands since 1993, but we have to ask ourselves whether people have really taken a proper look. If you have an idea about something, you don't necessarily adjust it until someone draws your attention to the changes. If there's no need to adjust what you know, you generally don't.

Hence the wave. A wave takes a long time to come into being. It sweeps along whatever is living, necessary and indispensable – this is a case of directed forces – but once the wave is in motion, it continues to build strength. I know it then breaks, as I was reminded on the last day of the year, but I also know for certain that we won't dwell on the breaking of the wave when it reaches the beach.

No, before you know it we'll have forgotten the breaking.

Instead we'll see the tidemark as a beacon. What we remember are the treasures left behind, the discoveries which make beachcombers happy. A tidemark sounds like the end, but it's really the beginning.

The important thing is what remains after 2016. Observe that significance as you read. Think of everything left to be found after 2016. Observe how happy it makes you.

BART MOEYAERT

Translated by Anna Asbury

'There Is Infinite Enrichment in Perishing'

Leo Vroman (1915-2014)

Leo Vroman was the sort of poet who seemed to have been around forever and promised to go on for just as long. When I learned to read as a child, a volume of his collected poems entitled *Gedichten 1946-1984* (Poems 1946-1984) had recently been published to mark his seventieth birthday. When I first became interested in poetry, he was well into his eighties, but nevertheless still publishing work. In fact, he seemed to become even more productive. Towards the end of his life, a substantial volume appeared almost every two years: 'My prattle pours out perversely' he writes in the poem *Een open kraan* (An open tap), in which he considers his remarkable productivity. His last volumes of poetry often reflect in a superior, ironic way on aging, the corresponding decline of the human body and the impending end of life. In many of these poems, Vroman tries to imagine what happens after death. Is there a heaven? Is there nothing? And what about his eternal love for his wife Tineke? In 'De dood' (Death), from the collection *Nee nog niet dood* (No, not yet dead), Vroman produces an antidote to uncertainty: 'My death will die with my death, / so what's stopping it'. Although his poetry does not lack a sense of perspective, it possesses great vitality: life is wonderful. So despite the realisation that his life is almost over, and the fact that he is at peace with this, he still clings to life nevertheless. How else do you explain the huge urge to write? Even his last two volumes had 216 and 160 pages respectively.

Vroman was born in 1915, the son of Jewish parents. He fled during the Second World War, ending up in the Dutch East Indies, via England and Cape Town, where he was taken as a prisoner of war. After liberation he settled in the United States, where he married and began a career as a haematologist. He carried out pioneering work in the field of blood coagulation; there is even a phenomenon named after him - the Vroman effect - that he described in an article in the respected journal *Nature* in 1962.