

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.

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Translated by Anna Asbury

'There Is Infinite Enrichment in Perishing'

Leo Vroman (1915-2014)

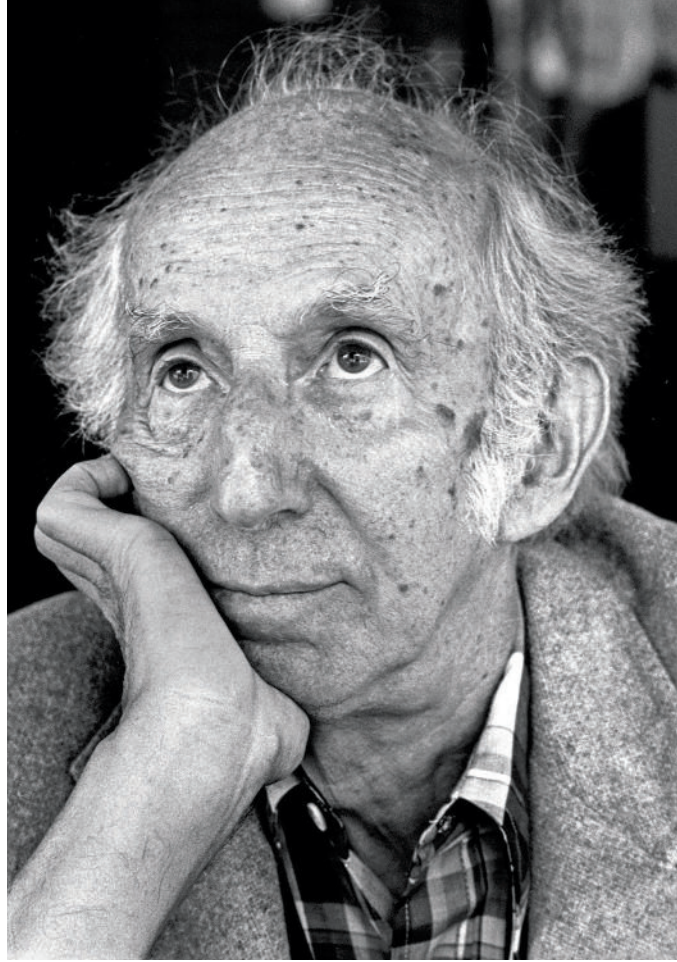
Leo Vroman was the sort of poet who seemed to have been around forever and promised to go on for just as long. When I learned to read as a child, a volume of his collected poems entitled *Gedichten 1946-1984* (Poems 1946-1984) had recently been published to mark his seventieth birthday. When I first 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.

He had already made his debut as a poet back in 1933, and during the war he contributed to the legendary surrealist journal *De schone zakdoek* (The clean handkerchief), of which only one copy was made of each issue, and subsequently contributed to various periodicals. His first collection, *Gedichten* (Poems), was published in 1946, and in 1964 he received the P.C. Hooft Award, the highest literary award in the Netherlands.

Vroman's poetry, which was at once surreal and realistic, was perceived as refreshing in the immediate post-war literary climate, which was mainly focused on restoration. In the 1950s, when the experimental generation sought to reinvigorate poetry by breaking all conventions, Vroman was a sort of in-between figure: innovative, but not radical. This typifies his position as a poet: he did not join any particular movement and his work does not belong to any particular school, which of course can partly be explained by his position as a literal outsider. Recurring themes in both his poems and his diaries are memories of his childhood and his experience of the war, his family and his love for his wife and daughters, and his work as a scientist. This in particular led him to believe that, although the world might at first seem chaotic and incoherent, it is actually full of correlations. In volumes such as *Liefde, sterk vergroot* (Love, greatly enlarged) and *Fractaal* (Fractal), he expresses the idea that everything is connected to everything else, a belief that culminates in *Psalmen en andere gedichten* (Psalms and other poems), in which poems written in Dutch and English invoke a 'System'. This is not a secular variation of God, as Vroman makes clear in the opening poem, but the expression of a belief that there is a structure or principle underlying everything.

At a technical level, Vroman represents his idea that all things are connected by means of rhyme: corresponding sounds are used to emphasise the link between words, and by extension between phenomena. In addition, Vroman's poetry is colloquial and straightforward, making it easy to read. Poems such as 'Vrede' (Peace) ('Come this evening with your tales of / how at last the war is finished / then



Leo Vroman (1915-2014)
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repeat them ten times more and / still my tears flow undiminished') and 'Voor wie dit leest' (To whoever reads this) ('My printed words may teach you / but my hot mouth can't speak to you / I can't raise my hot hand from the page to touch you / What can I do? I can't reach you') are classics of Dutch poetry.

Leo Vroman is no more, he died just short of his 100th birthday. He hoped his poetry would survive him for a while, although he was quite realistic about this too. However, he firmly believed that we don't just disappear, but merge into something bigger: 'Although we all must die, / there is infinite enrichment in perishing.'

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Translated by Rebekah Wilson