

## Tradition as Scenario

On the Work of Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

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[ L A R S B E R N A E R T S ]

'What happened to me may be assumed to be familiar as the material of the oldest stories.' The person talking is the narrator of *Peachez, een romance* (Peachez, a Romance, 2017). The man is at the end of his career as a professor in Latin studies and so knows a fair amount of narrative material from antiquity. He transmits it in his research and teaching. In the course of the novel this professor will both follow and betray tradition. The ancient story which he presents as a scenario, and which he knows through and through from his study of Tertullian, is that of conversion. But the old story is given new clothes. Through a Catphishing message, he encounters a certain Sarah Peachez. When they embark on an intensive exchange of emails, he neglects his university work more and more. Anyone following the intertextual trail of Tertullian, realises that the professor is leaving his subject for imaginary love just as the Latin writer converted to Christianity. 'The love that we know between people,' preaches the professor in a lecture, 'is like the human love of God an act of creation, which in modern psychological jargon is also known as projection.' What resounds in that statement is a well-known letter from St Paul to the Corinthians, as the reader of *Peachez* realises long before. In the words of the narrator: 'Faith, hope and charity, these three. And all things considered they are one and the same. You create a God in your own image.' On that level in the work of Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer great themes such as love, migration and literature are comparable: they are always grafted onto tradition, scenario and imagination.

Tradition is a treacherous protagonist in Pfeijffer's writing. The writer derives his mastery from 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', to quote T.S. Eliot. In his classic essay with that title the modernist poet argues in 1919 that the critics of his time are inclined always to emphasise what makes a poet new and hence individual. Tradition becomes a blind spot, although 'not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'. Only when the poet is in touch with tradition can he really assess and assert the topical value of his work. A few decades later the German thinker Theodor Adorno goes a step further when he argues in *Ohne Leitbild* (1967) that poetry must at once embrace and repulse tradition: 'Poetry can only rescue its truth content, if in as close as possible a contact with tradition it rejects the latter.'



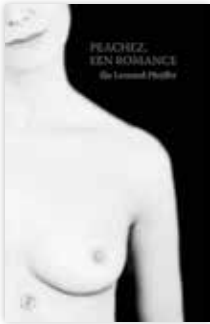
Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer  
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## Embracing resistance

This paradox definitely applies to Pfeijffer's work. It is imbued with a sense of literary tradition and it derives its uniqueness and contemporary character precisely from that hyper-awareness and the embracing resistance. 'Originality' is a misplaced term, because for that his brash dialogue with tradition is too crucial. To begin with Pfeijffer emphatically transmits literary tradition by making it accessible and comprehensible for a contemporary audience. In 2000, for instance, he publishes *De Antieken* (The Ancients), a history of Greek and Latin literature from antiquity, in which, with humour and decisiveness, he tells the story of literature from Homer (eighth century before Christ) to Quintilian (approximately 35 to 100 AD). Ten years later he retells the Greek myths in an even freer style.

He is active as the erudite compiler of anthologies such as *De canon van de Europese poëzie* (The Canon of European Poetry; 2008, with Gert Jan de Vries) and recently *De Nederlandse poëzie van de twintigste en eenentwintigste eeuw in 1000 en enige gedichten* (Dutch Poetry of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century in 1,000 and More Poems, 2016). By translating poets such as the Greek Pindar and the seventeenth-century writer Constantijn Huygens Pfeijffer also makes tradition tangible and topical. And in addition the writer, through creative and academic interpretations of canonical work, contributes to the transmission to posterity of the literary heritage. All these activities are extensions of each other. If the anthologist and translator are at first sight helpful transmitters, Pfeijffer shows that they are just as much creative renewers through the idiosyncratic choices that they make. It follows from his view of literature that the transition from anthologising, translating, interpreting and retelling to pseudo-translation, parody, pastiche, intertextual allusions and his so-called own invention is fluid. Each well-thought-out imitation is a creative gesture.

Pfeijffer's poetics are many-sided and always evolving, but the dialogue with tradition – often in the form of mockery and competition – is constant. The quote from Bertolt Brecht that precedes the essays and reviews in *Het geheim van het vermoorde geneuzel. Een poëtica* (The Secret of the Murdered Bunkum. A Poetics, 2003): 'Style must be quotable. A quote is impersonal. Who are the best sons? Those who make us forget the father.' Pfeijffer includes the quote in Dutch and without mentioning Brecht: the father is almost forgotten. So anyone wanting to show respect to his predecessors had better not pay them too much respect. In the poem 'firebird' from *Het glimpen van de welkwiek* (The Glimpsing of the With-erWing, 2001), which embodies a view of poetics, it is stated as follows: 'true revolution eats its fathers up and does not ignore them / but consumes and chews them'. In addition the writer constantly transforms tradition into a scenario: He openly appeals to old patterns for new stories and poems. We need only think of the title of *Idyllen. Nieuwe poëzie* (Idylls. New Poetry, 2015), a collection which at the same time refers to an old genre and announces a renewal.



## Sublime acrobatics

The principal predecessors who echo in Pfeijffer's work are closely related to aspects of his poetics. The first is Pindar, the Greek poet of odes. In 1996 Pfeijffer obtains his doctorate from the University of Leiden with a study in which he examines three of Pindar's odes with a fine-tooth comb. Later he writes about Pindar in terms which since his debut collection *Van de vierkante man* (Of the Square Man, 1998) have applied to himself: 'Pindar is an experimental poet. His poetry is overfull, atmospheric and rich in sound. (...) The reader has to work hard to understand what he means. He subjects language itself to experiment.' In *De Antieken* (The Ancients) he notes that the Dutch poet and coryphee of the 'Movement of the Fifties', Lucebert, was inspired by Pindar via Hölderlin. Lucebert's poetry, of which Pfeijffer compiled an anthology in 2009 under the title *Er is alles in de wereld* (There is Everything in the World), is also an unmistakable reference point.

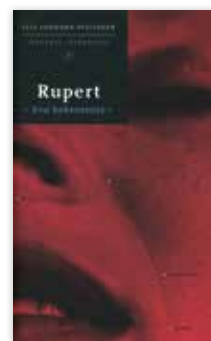
Pfeijffer follows the line of Pindar and Lucebert in *Van de vierkante man* (Of the Square Man), *Het glimpen van de welkwiek* (The Glimpsing of the WitherWing) and *In de naam van de hond* (In the Name of the Dog, 2005). The poetry in those col-

lections is not aimed at accessibility, certainty and order, but celebrates difficulty of understanding, uncertainty and caprice. The programmatic poem that opens his debut collection already announces this vision: 'Serve me images baked in butter / and poetry with bulimia' are the final lines. The rhetorical and theoretical arsenal that Pfeijffer deploys in his work is overwhelming or 'bulimic'. With a great variety of metrical options, complex stanza forms and sound patterns, the poems can appear as tightly structured and comprehensible and only present at second sight obstacles to simply understanding. At other times they overflow with untransparent, playful neologisms and ungrammatical sentences without punctuation. One sees traces of Lucebert and poetry becomes sublime acrobatics. We see that for example in the collections *In de naam van de hond* (In the Name of the Dog) and *Het glimpen van de welkwiek* (The Glimpsing of the WitherWing; also at micro level in a palindrome like 'a te o poeta ateo poeta') or in the *Brieven uit Genua* (Letters from Genoa, 2016). In the Poetry Week gift publication *Giro giro tondo* (2015) the structural principle is present in the obsessive repetition required by the genre of the sonnet cycle and to which the title refers. The seventh and hence middle sonnet is the place where a happy love turns to disappointment. The beloved who is being addressed finds it difficult to accept that as a lover she is a figment of the imagination according to the I-figure. But he persists: 'We create those who love us in our own image.'

*La Superba* (2013) also shows the ineluctability of the mirror effect both in an embracing structure and in the story. The novel begins with 'The Most Beautiful Girl in Genoa' and ends with 'The Most Beautiful Girl in Genoa (reprise)'. In the last scene the character Ilja creates himself in the image of the other, and as a transvestite himself becomes the most beautiful girl. The novel demonstrates the complex inevitability of projection. That is not equatable with fatalism, but presupposes a recognition of mental models. Just as the author cannot escape tradition and so can better turn it expertly and self-consciously to his advantage, so man can better take control of the imagination that drives him.

While in the technical field Pfeijffer vies with old masters like Pindar, he determinedly gives tradition a new manifestation. A topos like the appeal to the muse sounds as follows: 'muse sing to me of the man with the many pressed sports jackets.' His modernisation of classical forms and motifs is not only reminiscent of T.S. Eliot, whose *The Waste Land* he integrated structurally in the novel *Rupert* (2002), but also of Martinus Nijhoff. In his 2016 anthology of modern Dutch poetry, Pfeijffer includes a maximum number of poems by Lucebert and Nijhoff, including poems that Pfeijffer makes echo throughout his oeuvre. Nijhoff's 'Awater' (which T.S. Eliot admired) is an important intertext in *Idyllen* (Idylls). With words and images from 'Awater' the collection with its fifty long poems in rhyming couplets makes it clear that the subject compensates for the experience of a sense of security in the present time with powerful illusions, such as the imagination of a travelling companion, an Awater.

In *Het geheim van het vermoorde geneuzel* (The Secret of the Murdered Bun-kum) Pfeijffer clarifies the vision that guides him in incorporating his predecessors. What he considers bad poems at that time are poems that are determined to be about something, use authenticity as a credible criterion and aim at comprehensibility. Successful poetry is poetry that frustrates and disturbs, plays with sound and language, and is not reducible. The acrobat is not far



away when Pfeijffer says that poetry is 'a sophisticated fair attraction in which your own thoughts are yo-yoed. I want another go.' Acrobatics and fairs belong to the domain of risky games: although they appear to be separate from work and daily life, something is always at stake; they work directly on the body and elicit a response of being overwhelmed. That is what poetry can be like.

### Illusion of love

A decade later Pfeijffer bids farewell to his poetics of uprooting. The requirement of risk remains, but is now defined differently. *La Superba, Gelukszoekers* (Searchers after Happiness) and *Idyllen* bear witness to that change of course. In a programmatic poem from *Idyllen*, which has the character of a manifesto (all the more because in 2016 Pfeijffer the anthologist includes it as the only poem of his own), the lyrical I pleads for committed poetry. However, the careful reader does not see a simple rejection of his earlier work. True, it says 'I was wrong in the past' and 'No more deconstructions, no cryptograms, no quizzes', but the fact that he criticises the exaltation of the incomprehensible, does not mean that poetry now has to be accessible and unambiguous. After all: the 'little poets of the Netherlands / and Belgium' must 'know everything / that googling fingers forget daily'. A poem must 'tell it like it is' by transcending this directly available and fleeting knowledge. We see how Pfeijffer presents the change of heart almost as a conversion and that is no coincidence. At the same period *Brieven uit Genua* (Letters from Genoa) and *Peachez, een romance* (Peachez, a Romance) testify to a new belief in the illusion of love alongside that turning point in his poetics.

Pfeijffer puts his changed view of literature into practice by directing cultural criticism at dominant modes of thinking, not only in the form of political commentaries or in a poem on Trump's election victory, but also through his literary reflections on migration, the media and virtual worlds. In a place where the reader may not expect it, these strands are strongly linked together, namely in the apparently nihilistic reportages of *Second Life* (2007). Here Pfeijffer assumes the form of Lilith Lunardi and with that avatar migrates to the virtual world of Second Life. That starting point is a striking reflection of what happens in *La Superba*: a man, who eventually becomes (the parody of) a woman, settles in another country and shows partly from an assortment of perspectives of other migrants that migration always draws on a reservoir of virtual reality. The migrant who wants a new place to live or the man who desires a woman; both cloak reality with imagination. The process is so strong that the world becomes virtual. In both works, the ontological boundary between fiction and reality is undermined, so that omnipresent claims to authenticity become problematical.

### Illusion of fiction

In this area too Pfeijffer's hyper-consciousness shows through in his work: the writer is very concerned both to deflate and to cultivate the illusion of fiction. In the novels *Rupert, Het grote baggerboek* (The Big Dredging Book, 2008) and *Peachez* that is done through unreliable narrators who are out to mislead the



reader they are addressing, but finally mainly get lost in their own rhetoric. It is no coincidence that the narrators are placed in an institutional environment (a psychiatric institution, a legal environment), which elicits such manipulative language. What the novels make clear, however, is that every story misleads. Nowhere is the illusion of the novel so insistently, demonstratively and wittily undermined as in *Het ware leven, een roman* (True Life, a Novel, 2006), and that is achieved to a large extent via literary tradition. Not only does Pfeijffer parody the work of contemporary Dutch writers such as Connie Palmen, A.F.Th. Van der Heijden and Jan Wolkers, but he also alludes to the work of Goethe, Kloos, Tolstoy and many others. In most cases he presents the literary past as a hollowed-out pattern. In this way, the hyper-consciousness of tradition becomes a sign of critical distance.

Pfeijffer is not without criticism either for the contemporary world of the internet and social media. The awareness of the past sharpens his criticism and can help to relativise the novelty of current developments. In the same way as *La Superba* confronts the stories of migrants today with migration in the past, *Brieven uit Genua* (Letters from Genoa) and *Idyllen* (Idylls) recall historical changes that put the digital revolution and political changes in perspective. Where he attacks superficiality and emotive culture, which reign supreme in a time of internet and social media, the narrator says ironically: 'I feel nostalgia for the days when the Stoa forbade emotions and saw feelings as irrelevant.'

Tradition continues to operate not only in allusions, emphatic references, parodies of existing texts, but is evoked also in choices of genre. Anyone surveying Pfeijffer's oeuvre notices a fascination with genres as models. Besides the genres already mentioned, we find theatrical texts, a travelogue, a radio story, song lyrics, a TV documentary, a radio play, a self-help book and so on. In Pfeijffer's view, the literary interview and the poetry performance genres demand skill and deserve manipulation as well.

On the one hand, genres are firm moulds that make creativity possible. In *Harde feiten, 100 romans* (Hard Facts. 100 Novels), the writer imposes on himself the 'strict formal limitation' of writing 500-word micro novels. Such an exercise in narrative art is reminiscent of the regulated writing of OuLiPo, the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle or workshop for potential literature of writers like Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec. But Pfeijffer does not always keep to the rules he has set himself in *Harde feiten*. On the other hand,

Pfeijffer's work is constantly extending his models through parody, topicalisation and subtle genre transgressions. We can see that from the way he uses classical verse and stanza forms, but also in the story lines and characters. The first-person characters in his work sometimes parody the lonely heroes from popular genres: the romantic bohemian, the lonely cowboy, the bold knight or the exalted samurai.

### Prescribed paths

Pfeijffer's texts then are particularly genre and tradition-aware, which links them to one of the central ideas: that life and literature cannot escape scenarios that are pre-existing and have a fictional nature. Finally, how does the reader fit into that image of Pfeijffer's literature? The reader too follows prescribed paths. Pfeijffer's narrators are generous in signposting: they deliberately send the reader in all kinds of interpretive directions. For example, the narrator of *La Superba* repeatedly describes the themes of the novel and comments on the structure and the characters. Because such a reflection is already included in the novel, however, the reader can never place himself *above* the text; he writes himself into a web of words, but does not precede them or rise above them. He can only interpret docilely or contrarily, feign understanding or plead incomprehension, but these are all scenarios that are known in advance. Like love, migration and writing, reading too is ironically characterised by trust and hope, tradition and scenario. ■

*Translated by Paul Vincent*



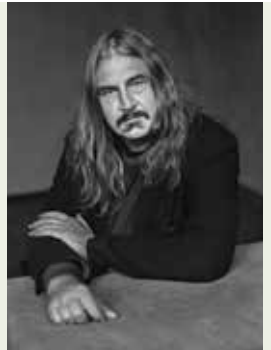
### FURTHER READING

Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, *Rupert: A Confession*, translated by Michele Hutchison, Open Letter, Rochester, USA, 2009.

Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer, *La Superba*, translated by Michele Hutchison, Deep Vellem, Dallas, USA, 2016.

## Two Poems

By Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer



### Farewell Dinner

you can clear the table  
the white-fringed nouvelle cuisine amuse-gueule  
of chrysanthemums that are standing in the vase on the table by the window  
but are not standing in the vase on the table by the window  
vegetarian still-lifes sketched with the silver pen

bring in the well-filled roast game pierced by the larding-pin  
and on a frank layer of dancing meat zap to shiny, lusty meat  
like a clip in full-sized colour

serve me images baked in butter  
and verses with bulimia

### Afscheidsdiner

u kunt afruimen  
de witomrande amuse gueule uit de nouvelle cuisine  
van chrysanten die in de vaas op de tafel bij het raam staan  
maar niet in de vaas op de tafel bij het raam staan  
vegetarische stilleventjes geschetst met de zilverstift

laat met de lardeerpriem doorregen goed gevulde  
wildbraad aanrukken en op een rondborstig banket  
van dansend vlees zappen naar glimmend wellustig vlees  
als een clip in grootbeeld kleur

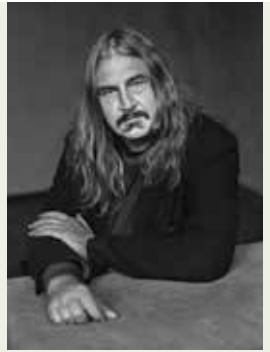
serveer mij in roomboter gebakken beelden  
en verzen met boulemie

From: *Van de vierkante man (Of the Square Man)*, 1998



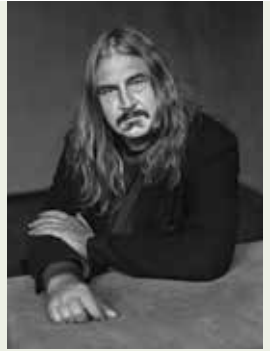
But friends, all you little poets of the Netherlands so dear  
and Belgium, I really must talk to you. I fear  
the weather has turned. Winter is coming. The nights  
throw off their sweaty covers with tossing mental flights.  
The days are rattled off. Otherwise  
the right questions would arise.  
Cold dishes are served with a shiver. Fear  
is of fearful things what we most fear.  
We can no longer make do with kitty pictures that  
fit our profile, predictably unusual chat  
on how the pancakes and the Moroccan's pals,  
on how there are mirror bikes in the canals  
on how the Vondelpark and then on your doorstep, a bit  
about the past now, one day perhaps and dog shit  
that's been accepted for a collection of art,  
on the relativising of a broken heart,  
on house plants in which Nietzsche's face is detected,  
on the existence of suburbs unsuspected,  
on shuffleboard referees, orange committee,  
worries, puppy love. I say not me.  
Whoever still dares to write has the solemn duty  
to produce more than something passably pretty  
that looks in amazement at feelings, which dazed  
and very moved looks like everything amazed  
that was once wrongly looked on as verse.  
We must face up to the fact that it's quite the reverse:  
our cosy niche threatens to get cosier still.  
While at the fragile gate the hordes are out to kill  
our debate is on how to masturbate.  
We still have subsidies to fill our plate,  
while we knit on spools like girls. But I'm telling you.  
Because what we do is, put briefly or at length, not true.  
It is untruth the truth to negate  
while our own pastime we simply create,  
and loudly thump our own breast and each other's nose,  
artillery booms over the horizon. No cock crows,  
though we have already betrayed each other at least thrice.  
Wading through each other's swamps in pink wellies so nice  
and blowing tender bubbles in the bath of balls and stuff –  
we can do that and I have had enough.  
A man is not made just eggs to lay.  
Whoever thinks he has something to say, something must say.  
The winter's coming and will last many years.  
The poets will sing by the fires full of fears  
or will no longer be poets. We must know everything

those googling fingers daily forget.  
No more deconstructions, no cryptogram, no quiz.  
We must learn to tell it like it is.  
In the past I myself had erred.  
Uprooter that I used to be. The false word  
that I had to loosen the loose screws even more  
and must passionately bury heaps of certainties galore,  
did not do the business any good.  
Someone with a good question wants to be understood,  
since otherwise there'll be no one left to understand.  
Gasping for air with too much air I stand,  
being out of breath with wild coughing strangulate  
while I underestimated how people calculate  
and really need everything today  
except what makes certainties ebb away.  
The romanticism of *épater la bourgeoisie*  
has gathered dust like a precious reliquary  
that has lost relevance and urgency, it's plain.  
Whoever doesn't know how to feel, should listen again.  
Prophets don't stand in the sand on a rock,  
to be unheard alone in their camelhair frock.  
When the world goes crazy with madmen's chat  
he will explain on prime-time just where it's at  
and in the mud, high-vis jacket to the chin  
will survive in harmony with the next of kin.  
There's a storm. Or is it the hooves of the hordes  
raising dust from the south to the fjords  
and oceans with their rage will return  
so that dry land will become calm sea and lakes in cities churn,  
and automats will dispense ice and our cash amount  
like constantly falling dust one can no longer count?  
From our outposts I hear the strangest convolution:  
we've been relieved by evolution.  
The towers have long since fallen. The day after tomorrow  
will most probably be even worse than tomorrow.  
I don't want to sit here being apocalyptic.  
But winter's coming. We must learn to read the skies, though cryptic.  
So friends, great poets of all the Netherlands  
and Belgium, where there is shouting language has no plans.  
I ask nothing, want nothing, demand nothing, have nothing to explain.  
But perhaps we can begin to say something again?



Maar vrienden, lieve dichtertjes van Nederland  
en België, ik moet met jullie praten. Want  
het weer is omgeslagen. Winter komt. De nachten  
ontbloten zich bezweet met woelende gedachten.  
De dagen worden afgeraffeld. Anders zouden  
de juiste vragen aan de orde komen. Koude  
gerechten worden rillend opgediend. De angst  
is van de bange dingen wel het allerbangst.  
We kunnen nu niet meer volstaan met poezenplaatjes  
op ons profiel, voorspelbaar ongewone praatjes  
van hoe de pannenkoeken en de Marokkaan,  
van hoe er spiegelfietsen in de grachten staan,  
van hoe het Vondelpark en daarna op je stoep,  
van vroeger, nu en ooit misschien en hondenpoep  
die in een kunstcollectie opgenomen is,  
van het relativieren van een groot gemis,  
van kamerplanten die op Friedrich Nietzsche lijken,  
van het bestaan van onvermoede buitenwijken,  
van sjoelbakcontroleurs, oranjecomité,  
beslommeringen, poppenliefdes. Ik zeg nee.  
Wie nu nog durft te schrijven, heeft de dure plicht  
iets méér te leveren dan een zesmingedicht  
dat met verwondering naar de ontroering kijkt  
en zeer ontroerd verwonderd echt op alles lijkt  
wat eerder al ten onrechte werd aangezien  
voor poëzie. We moeten onder ogen zien  
dat onze knusse niche steeds knusser dreigt te worden.  
Terwijl de broze poort belaagd wordt door de horden,  
gaat ons debat erover hoe te masturberen.  
We kunnen nu nog even op subsidies teren  
en punniken als meisjes. Maar. Er is een maar.  
Want wat wij doen is, lang of kort gepraat, niet waar.  
Het is onwaarheid om de waarheid te negeren.  
Terwijl we slechts ons eigen tijdverdrijf creëren  
en luid op eigen borst en elkaars smoelen slaan,  
weergalmt geschut achter de kim. Er kraait geen haan,  
al hebben we elkaar toch ruim drie keer verraden.  
Op roze laarsjes door elkaars moerasjes waden  
en broze bellen blazen in het ballenbad ---  
dat kunnen we en daarmee heb ik het gehad.  
Een mens is niet gemaakt om eieren te leggen.  
Wie iets te zeggen meent te hebben, moet iets zeggen.  
De winter komt en hij zal vele jaren duren.  
De dichters zullen zingen bij de bange vuren  
of niet meer dichters zijn. We moeten alles weten

wat googelende vingers dagelijks vergeten.  
Geen deconstructies meer, geen cryptogram, geen quiz.  
We zullen moeten leren zeggen hoe het is.  
Ik heb het zelf in het verleden fout gedaan,  
ontwortelaartje dat ik mij daar was. De waan  
dat ik de toch al losse schroeven nog meer moest  
ontregelen en hoopjes zekerheden woest  
moest ondergraven, heeft de zaak geen goed gedaan.  
Ook wie een goede vraag heeft, wil worden verstaan,  
want anders is er niemand meer die het nog snapt.  
Ik heb met te veel lucht naar lucht gehapt  
om ademnood met woest gehoest te laten stikken,  
terwijl ik onderschatte hoe de mensen wikken  
en wegen en aan alles echt behoefte hebben  
behalve aan wat zekerheden weg doet ebben.  
De romantiek van *épater la bourgeoisie*  
heeft stof verzameld als een dierbaar relikwie  
dat relevantie en urgentie heeft verloren.  
Wie niet weet hoe hij voelen moet, moet weer eens horen.  
Profeten staan niet op een rots in de woestijn  
om eenzaam kemelharig ongehoord te zijn.  
Wanneer de wereld doldraait van de gekkenpraat,  
zal hij op prime-time uitleggen waar het om gaat  
en in de modder met een fluorhesje aan  
met nabestaanden zeer eendrachtig nabestaan.  
Het onweert. Of is dat de hoefslag van de horden  
die stof opwerpen van het zuiden tot het noorden  
en oceanen met hun woede zullen keren  
dat droog land stille zee wordt en de steden meren,  
de automaten ijs verstrekken en ons geld  
als almaar vallend stof niet langer wordt geteld?  
Ik hoor het raarste nieuws van onze buitenposten:  
we zijn de door de evolutie afgelosten.  
De torens zijn al lang gevallen. Overmorgen  
zal hoogstwaarschijnlijk almaar slechter zijn dan morgen.  
Ik wil hier niet apocalyptisch zitten wezen.  
Maar winter komt. We moeten luchten leren lezen.  
Dus vrienden, grote dichters van heel Nederland  
en België, waar wordt geschreeuwd is taal vacant.  
Ik vraag niets, wil niets, eis niets, heb niets uit te leggen.  
Maar kunnen we misschien beginnen iets te zeggen?



From: *Idyllen. Nieuwe poëzie* (Idylls. New Poetry), 2015  
Translated by Paul Vincent

## An Extract from *Letters from Genoa*

By Ilja Leonard Pfeijffer

### Letter to Europe

You sit in your flat in Brussels and watch the television. The news has been showing the same images for months. Thousands of Africans, setting off from the Libyan coast, where you were born, in rickety, crowded, barely seaworthy boats, risking their lives, driven by despair, with hope in their eyes, are trying to cross the sea you crossed. They are fleeing from wars, oppression and poverty that you yourself caused. Many do not make it. They were given too little water and too little petrol. There are too many of them. The boat lets in water. The waves are too high. There are too many waves. They had said it was not far. They had said they would be rescued. Sometimes hundreds of them drown at once. They had promised them the promised land and not the sea. But now they will forever see the sea with dead eyes. It is your sea. The sea that was there at your birth and to which you were always so happy to return on holiday with flowers on your summer dress and flip-flops, sipping at your cava, prosecco or retsina, has now become a mass grave.

Thousands of Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, crouched on the axles of speeding lorries or hidden inside airtight containers or refrigeration units, driven by despair, with hope in their eyes, risking their lives, are trying to reach the coast from where they will be able to see Greece, the land where you were made a woman and became an adult. They are fleeing the wars that you yourself caused. Many do not make it. There are too many roads and too many borders and checkpoints. There are too many minutes that last hours. They hold their breath in fear and do not dare to move. There are too many bumps in the road. The cargo begins to shift. The pallets of tinned dogfood and crates of frozen fish that they hide behind press into their legs, backs and chests. There are too many of them and there is not enough oxygen. They suffocate on your roads, dozens of them at once. A dead toddler washes up onto a Greek beach. It is your beach, where you gave life to your three sons and to which you were always so glad to go back on holiday in your swimsuit with the flowers on, to lie in the sun, as an eagle flew by high above you, and not to have to think about anything for a little while and to listen to the splashing of the sea, the sea.

You might expect that those who do make it, those who succeed in reaching your coasts, would be welcomed as heroes, just as people welcome athletes who have performed arduous physical and mental feats. But they represent the wrong countries and the people here are not fans of their sport, the aim of which is to stay alive and to be permitted to live like the people who see them on television. It is all too serious. Feelings of fear and guilt are involved. It has to remain entertainment, after all. They are afraid that they are coming too close and wonder if there are enough televisions to satisfy all those foreigners.

They themselves had to work hard for their television and they are scared that the black people are coming to take it away.

You might think that those who have succeeded in escaping poverty, oppression and war, those who have been able to reach the Free West, would be embraced as brothers, just as we embraced as brothers the Hungarians in 1956, the Czechs in 1968 and the East Germans in 1989, those who had crept through the Iron Curtain or climbed over the Wall to flee communist dictatorships and finally join us in freedom. But they have the wrong names and are the wrong colour. They kneel to the wrong God. There are too many of them. No one can cope with so many brothers. New walls are hastily constructed and barriers of barbed wire are erected in an attempt to stop them.

[...]

You stand up from your chaise longue, turn off the television and hobble on your old, stiff legs to the windows of your flat in Brussels to close the shutters. If you do not see the pariahs, perhaps they will automatically cease to exist. All you really want is to be left in peace with your memories of simpler times when the world outside stayed outside. But you are old, Madame. I love you dearly and to me you are still just as beautiful as when you crossed the sea as a girl with a basket of flowers on the back of a bull and, face to face with an eagle, became a woman, or even more beautiful than that, as history has furrowed and adorned your face with character and sorrowful wisdom, but we have to recognise, you and I, that you are old. Your pale, thin hands are almost transparent. They can plough no more soil, thresh no more grain, and knead no more dough. You cannot even dress yourself anymore. Your gowns, negligees, handbags and boas come from China. Your fantasies are made in Hollywood and your telephone calls are conducted by someone in India. All you have now is your memories, which you can sell. But that does not bring in enough even to cover your doctors' bills. Your old age is costing more than you can make. You cannot carry on like this. Someone should take care of you.

And when you open your shutters again and look outside, I will tell you what you see. What has travelled from afar from the land where you were born and has come to you across the sea you crossed is your youth. See how broad their black backs are and how strong their black muscles. They are like bulls. See that look of hope and fighting spirit in their eyes. It is the look of an eagle. You must not be afraid of them. You need them. They are exactly what you need. There is nothing you need more than them. Open your windows, unlock your door, and welcome them. Bring them inside and embrace them. Hang garlands of flowers around their necks. They are your future.

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*Translated by Laura Watkinson*