



**Speech by the opening  
46th Poetry International Festival  
Rotterdam, 9 juni 2015**

**Reasons to be Cheerful**

You can't eat poetry. Rain goes right through it, and it doesn't burn for long enough to really keep you warm. Poetry doesn't provide a roof above your head, doesn't give you a bed, bath or bread; it doesn't save you from traffic jams, and you can't smear it over your legs when you go to the beach.

Poetry doesn't occupy any hotel rooms. Poetry doesn't fill restaurants, and neither does it help the growth of the middle class in the city centre. Poetry doesn't care about the North/South divide, nor the one between East and West, and it can't stop continental drift, the rise in sea levels or atmospheric pollution.

In a school class of 30 children, only 0.2 are touched by poetry. This translates to 1.3 children in an average residential area, and 12.4 in a city with a population of 200,000. Poetry barely touches urban illiteracy rates. It's not on television, doesn't influence viewing or listening figures, and doesn't keep a single person from alcohol, drugs, smoking or a fatty diet. Poetry doesn't ban wheely suitcases. It pays no role in collective bargaining, doesn't urge stakeholders towards horizontal clustering or lure people to the polls. Poetry doesn't attract major sponsors, it holds no sway over public debate, and it doesn't level out top salaries.

Poetry doesn't fill the gap left by a withdrawing government and is not armed against the flip sides of the digital revolution. Poetry doesn't warn about gas leaks or excessively high levels of particulate matter; it doesn't stop a single militant travelling to Syria or help you journey safely from Africa to Italy. Poetry doesn't keep a single boat afloat, or an airplane in the sky, or a car on the road.

Poetry is tough. Tricky. Eccentric. It is contrived language. A secret language used amongst friends. Museum language. Barrier language. Opaque language. Anti-communication. Perverse language that bypasses all rules and conventions. Elitist language that reminds us of the limits of our brains, again and again. It is an elusive, arrogant, intellectual language. Language that alienates and discriminates. Partisan, anti-democratic language. Poetry is the soft language of a tiny voice, spoken by a negligible minority.

No one gets rich from poetry. Not the poet, not the designer, not the printer, the editor, the publisher or the distributor, not the bookseller or the festival organiser. Poetry evades all laws of economics, all social codes. Poetry is elusive, and in its elusiveness it fuels your doubts and increases your ability to fail. Poetry is arguably the most precise language when you falter. And the most unstable language when you are fully conscious. When poetry pulls you into unaccountable visions and the darkness of night thoughts, it is the torpedo from the depths, the inventory of our confusion and our shortcomings, of our resistance to perfection. It is the language that seduces us and overwhelms us when we think we've mastered it, shakes us awake when we think we must rest and convinces us that we are wrong at the moment of our conviction. It is poetry that offers us possible words when something momentous happens to us. It offers a complexity that is consoling.

Poetry is more than the words it speaks. It is, as the poets in this collection express, more than speech without sound, more than words that don't sleep. It is the power of words, mastery of the original thought, delicate and elusive, bobbing at the height of the bushes. It is the visible side that announces the colour, a virgin's scream in the rainbow; it is a beauty worth protecting, cheek to cheek. It is the literal potential of things, a mimicry of migrating birds, the union of foliage and sun, a contract with the clouds. It is everything that becomes visible during defrosting, and the truth we forget because of remembering.

Poetry is, as the Dutch Poet Laureate Anne Vegter recently said, the stool we climb onto when we want to peek into other realities. What poetry is, it is in itself. 'That which cannot be conceived through anything else must be conceived through itself,' Spinoza once said. Or, poetry isn't about something, it is something. Poetry, ladies and gentlemen, is happiness.