

Carefully arguing

The poetry of Martin Reints

Martin Reints is a poet who likes to think. It shows in his poetry. Or, he may be a thinker with a gift for writing poetry. In an interview after the publication of his second collection *Lichaam en ziel* (Body and soul) he said: 'Thinking fascinates me. On the one hand you are what you can see, the reality around us, and on the other hand you are what's in your head. What is the relation between the two?' In a good-natured, crystal-clear, often humorous manner Martin Reints's poems probe what he sees around him and what is in his head. The 'I' allows his thoughts to spread, first along the table he is working at, then along the furniture and objects in the room, along the incoming light, the darkness or the sounds in the interior, before dispersing into the outside world. In fact, all Martin Reints's poems are thought exercises. They are concerned with environment, the passage of time, memory, the relation between the 'I' and what surrounds it. The poems are free in form, but very precise, 'carefully arguing' (to quote critic Piet Gerbrandy). Rob Schouten expressed it like this: 'Reints's poems have a smooth, natural, unconstrained flow; they combine gravity with humour, enjoyment with philosophy, spontaneity with precision. They are a joy to read and don't leave one's thoughts untouched.'

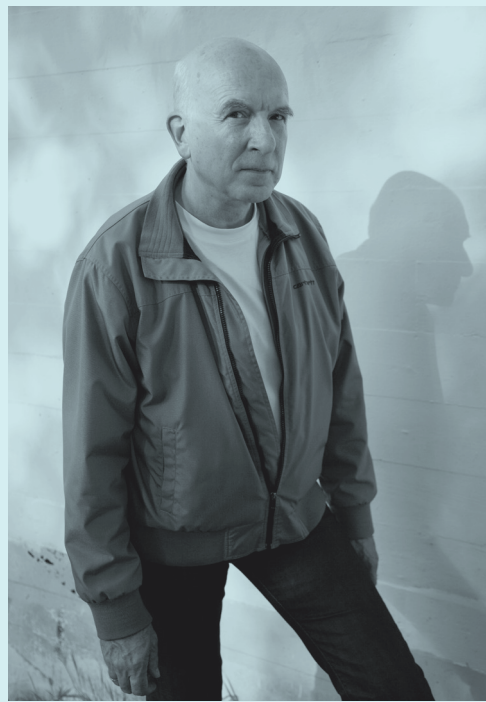


Photo: Bert Nienhuis

Martin Reints (b. 1950) has published five collections of poetry. After *Waar ze komt daar is ze* (Where she comes, there she is, 1981), he waited eleven years to publish the second book: *Lichaam en ziel* (Body and soul, 1992, Herman Gorter Prize). The next two, *Tussen de gebeurtenissen* (Between the events, 2000) and

Ballade van de winstwaarschuwing (Ballad of the profit warning, 2005) were both shortlisted for the prestigious VSB Poetry Prize. Most recently *Lopende zaken* (Matters at hand, 2010) appeared. For his collection of essays *Nacht- en dagwerk* (Night and day-work, 1988) he received the Jan Greshoff Prize.

Contemporary Dutch Poets

This brochure is part of the *Contemporary Dutch Poets*-series, featuring a choice of today's most interesting poets from the Netherlands. The series is published by the Dutch Foundation for Literature. If you would like to receive more information or other brochures from this series, please contact Thomas Möhlmann (t.moehlmann@letterenfonds.nl).

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Martin Reints Abroad

Reints's poems have been translated and published in anthologies and reviews in China, England, France, Germany, Spain and Macedonia.

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I experience the way in which Martin Reints almost says nothing as being incredibly alienating, displaying a sense of wonder that has remained intact, a gripping objectivity and a serene helplessness – and being witty too.

Belgian poet and critic Herman de Coninck

Martin Reints' poems are marvellous.

Maarten Doorman in Dutch daily NRC Handelsblad

Even his announcement that the Milky Way and the Andromeda Galaxy are making straight for each other seems to have a consoling undertone. It is above all a sense of wonder that speaks from his poetry – at the absurdity of the world that surrounds us, and the strong will to maintain that sense of wonder at it.

Victor Schiferli in Dutch daily Het Parool

Sample translation

Poems by Martin Reints (Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij)

Translated by John Irons

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2010: From *Lopende zaken* (Matters at hand), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2010

2005: From *Ballade van de winstwaarschuwing* (Ballad of the profit warning), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2005

2000: From *Tussen de gebeurtenissen* (Between the events), De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2000

Followed by **'Even offices wear down into dust'**: an interview with Martin Reints

For additional information on Martin Reints and other Dutch poets, please also visit:

- The poetry pages at the foundation website: www.nlpvf.nl/p/

- The Dutch domain of Poetry International Web: <http://netherlands.poetryinternationalweb.org>

Passage

Check if the post's already there
switch off the computer?

interrupt work
since clearly it's been interrupted in your head

get up and leave the room by the door to the passage

the pattern of the tiles in the passage floor, your footsteps
the orbit of the earth around the sun
the Milky Way

your path past the boxes, the mirror
the shopping bag with empties

the outside door.

Fringe of reeds

The female shop assistant:
'what you're looking for
doesn't exist'

the other female shop assistant:
'it does exist once you stop looking for it'

the world on this side of the door
is the same as the world you enter
when you go through the door

the land settles, the water flows
the fringe of reeds billows in the mist.

Petrol pump

Stop the car at a petrol pump
so the petrol cap doesn't end up too far in front or behind the dispenser
where you can see how much you've tanked

get out - is that called a dispenser - unscrew

the petrol cap
and place on some horizontal surface close by

get hold of the hose
tank until the pump stops
pull the hose a bit further back
keep on tanking till the pump shows a nice round figure

the wild west
the holidays of long ago
the future.

Autumn night

The uneasiness in my bowels
reminds me of my intestines

I'm lying in bed my legs itching

the spider sitting on the worktop in the afternoon
has dropped down into the sink
and is waiting

the rain starts to fall down onto the roof of the house
and the grass in the garden

one of the raindrops shatters on the washing line

another raindrop grazes
the refuse bin and dashes against a paving stone

another raindrop ends up on a leaf falling from the sycamore tree
and runs along a nerve to the edge of the leaf

and goes over the edge, lets go of the leaf and
goes into free fall once more and will
when the time comes

disappear among the grass stems, in a different spot from where
the sycamore leaf is presently going to land.

Stay

This is a tunnel

now that you're here
you don't know yet where you will be presently
and already no longer where you once were

for as long as it lasts

Shakespeare was here
and Moses, and Bai Juyi

they had a drill with them
just like you
and provisions
and a miner's lamp.

Gnu

So much hail falls at one time
that it looks as if thick fog envelops the world

in the ice the thousands of ripples
left there by yesterday's wind -
it looks like slowly-flowing white water

now that I've downloaded 87% of the file
I'm looking forward to the silence
that will descend once I've played it

the calm begins to sink in
with the sound of an attacked and
now having escaped gnu.

Townscape

Just a moment and the man walking there
on the other side, you can see he has just phoned

by the way he looks around

while he's already been hanging around in the vicinity for some time

just a moment look there's the bus
just a moment and that man is off to another vicinity

and if you wait just a moment the whole vicinity has gone:
the shelter with the large posters,

the rows of houses with the doorways and
the bay windows with the plants and their pots,

the rain, no the snow, no the rain.

Twilight without end

A sudden resolve
while the execution of the previous resolve is still underway

incidents
during other incidents

I can still remember that I had planned something
but already not what
but already almost why once more

a lick of paint
where you can imagine another lick of paint

a collision
but the bang is still to come.

Old meeting room

On the pushed-together tables
stands a tray with cups

a glass bowl with sachets of milk-powder
a glass bowl with sachets of sugar
and a packet of tea-bags

thermos flasks, cabinets from a distant past
a flap-over fallen into disuse like

an easel in the south of France
where the air shimmers with the heat
so that the cypresses look like filmed cypresses

an empty, undulating landscape with stone walls
and desolate country cottages

museums with old attendants on folding chairs and
successful directors who
walk past while looking at the paintings

cars in car parks
school buses with schoolchildren.

Singer-songwriter

You turn on the TV without the sound
and zap until the picture coincides with the sound the neighbours have

now you know what serial they're watching
but what use is that to you?

ten minutes before the performance the singer-songwriter comes in
with his guitar in a guitar-case and something else
but you don't know what

outside a weary backpacker wipes the sweat from his face
and brings a bottle of water to his lips

in the Himalayas the religions wind along
crumbling mountain paths and over hanging bridges
above deep ravines

trails of cloud move across the sky

the Milky Way and the Andromeda Galaxy make straight for each other.

Halfway

Right at the end of the passage is a door
but you are halfway, in a room
sitting reading a book

you know that in a page and a half a new chapter starts
but you don't know the name of that chapter yet

through the Venetian blind you can see that the bridge is open
and that it is closing once more

now a tram is slowly passing over

while a couple of passengers are keeping an eye
on each other over the edge of their newspapers

the conductress is talking via the intercom with the driver
and is already picturing to herself the final stop.

From the new world

The folding screen salesman is sitting on a mat
in front of a movable partition
looking at his collection of fans

the young man in his close-fitting cinnamon-bronze tail-coat
with his knee-breeches in his top-boots
has fetched his niece from the stage-coach

the oil-lamp replaces the candle
the electric light replaces the oil-lamp

the coffee is on for when father soon returns home
mother hums in the kitchen
a phrase from Dvořák's Ninth Symphony

now you are to ask: where are my reading glasses?
or: where is the remote control?

Lawnmower

Thoughts go on their way
but not their own way

like a lawnmower goes ahead of you
if you walk behind it

now that you can't sleep
you wait:
till what's happening in your head takes its own flight

won't you fall asleep
or can't you fall asleep

or: can't you let yourself fall asleep
which is it

you let your feet become heavy,
your legs, your entire body
till it's so heavy it seems to sink through the bed you're lying in

or lying on
which is it, nocturnal lawnmower

which, till your body's no longer there
or till it starts to grow light.

Misty letters

The barking of dogs
echoes between the wooden houses
in the highlands

letters lurch in heavily laden vans
over the roads

in the bitter scent of long suffering
your beauty grew

we expect you early afternoon

nighttime silence
is a continuation of daily music.

Walk

It may be
I've done this walk
tonight before

it may be that these surroundings have
often been in my memory before

for a short or a long while

but the track my feet are making
is not like the track my feet are following

the birds in the sky
are drunk on fermenting berries.

Fly

It's a summer evening
and there's a fly on the table

if I lift up my glass, it flies away
if I put my glass down, it comes back again

we're both of us listless
and the music I've put on
doesn't really get through to us

in my vicinity potatoes are being lifted out of the clay
in my head potatoes are being lifted out of the clay

what do the fly and I mean to each other?

What is there

The grass, the stones, the ground
your hips, your shoulders, your neck

the mist

and then:
the blowing to and fro, the wearing down
the spiral movements in the universe

the wisp-shaped clouds of starlings
what are they looking for?

give thoughts a long rein
and listen, and talk.

Recital

Sick hippos are reading the lyrics of a dismal song,
probably from before the war

the female singer lets one hand rest on the grand piano
and with the other is lifting something invisible

when someone discreetly blows his nose
that can be an expression of emotion
or something else – you do not know

the lion now taking up position behind the lectern
signals that the applause for the singer is to stop

outside shots are heard
an old goat falls down dead on a zebra crossing

experts start to deal with the circumstances of the incident
the hypothesis that underlies their enquiry is as
follows: every shoot-out has its immediate cause

through the town there flows a wide river

I ought to get out of bed to drink some hot milk
but will not do so
and my thoughts simply will not result in anything

nothing will:
all will is left on a kitchen mat,
well outside.

Back to the beginning

In the midst of the present
that dwells in its day-to-dayness
to leave memory step by step in the lurch

to leave yourself behind among all those things
that are being worn down there

that with their wearing down allow day-to-dayness to exist
in the strange rhythm within which bookcases full of books
and offices full of office furniture
change into clouds of dust

into hot desert sand that shimmers in mirages
into wild rivers and into new housing estates

because it can't be otherwise and because it happens to be so

to forget at ever-increasing speed:
what was it again?

and so to return to the beginning of thought
which actually isn't yet thought itself.

After the storm

The curtains were hanging, but now his memory started to falter
and he no longer knew what gesture is then appropriate

the wind had died down
and close by he could hear a swarm of crickets
but through this from afar
there came a low, old droning

*it scatters and brings together again
it approaches and is gone once more*

the fill-in forms had subsided
and lay among and on top of the fallen filing cabinets
but movement lived on in this wild still life
it would seem

and silently he sought a place where he too could subside
feeling over with his hands the familiar objects
in their unusual order

what afterimages drifted around inside that head of his?
and rolled over each other? and polished each other
until they disappeared?

Budapest

On the guided tour you're told how many chairs there are
how long the building construction lasted
how many kilos of gold have been used in it and
how many lamps burn there when all of them are lit

the fifties lie under the snow of Central Europe:
settled on the roofs
bulging on the branches of the spruces
and with the dullish gleam of polyester against the fences and
along the kerbstones

only the word for supermarket is recognisable
and the name Bartók Béla

with his right hand
the tourist in the old restaurant
brings the cup of coffee to his lips
so as with his left hand to allow the unused sachet
of sugar to slip inconspicuously into his jacket pocket

via a mirror
the cloakroom attendant and he keep an eye on each other

in the snow outside
like a modest film hero
a calmly trotting dog passes.

Climax of the argument

When speaker step by step, step
by step had reached the climax of
his argument

when what he so tellingly expressed in words
could be a summary of the preceding
but also the prelude to a continuation, then

he made for the verge of falling silent

and with his hands on the lectern and
a gaze on the most distant point of the hall
listened to the echo of his latest words

at any rate: his latest words so far

with which a silence fell into the silence
that was already there

and in that silence speaker heard the woodworms
in the planks on which his lectern still stood

and the creaking turning of our terrestrial globe

and a sort of muffled drumming of something
in the depths of the universe.

'Even offices wear down into dust'

An interview with Martin Reints

By Marjoleine de Vos

Translated by John Irons

Back to the beginning

*In the midst of the present
that dwells in its day-to-dayness
to leave memory step by step in the lurch*

*to leave yourself behind among all those things
that are being worn down there*

*that with their wearing down allow day-to-dayness to exist
in the strange rhythm within which bookcases full of books
and offices full of office furniture
change into clouds of dust*

*into hot desert sand that shimmers in mirages
into wild rivers and into new housing estates*

because it can't be otherwise and because it happens to be so

*to forget at ever-increasing speed:
what was it again?*

*and so to return to the beginning of thought
which actually isn't yet thought itself.*

From: Between the events, De Bezige Bij, 2000

Martin Reints (1950) is an economical poet. His first collection appeared in 1981, the second in 1992 and his third, *Between the events*, from which 'Back to the beginning' is taken, in 2000. His poems don't convey the impression of someone in a hurry, or someone constantly having to respond to impressions. He attempts to put into words something that can only be pinned down through persistent attention – and only just, even then. That does not make his poems ponderous. In fact, they are often light-hearted. As is the poet.

When you look at this poem, you see it has quite a surprising form. The lines vary a great deal in length. How do you decide on the length of a line?

"I have what I consider is an extremely simple system: if it is possible to put a whole sentence into one line, that is what I do. Otherwise I divide it after a part of a sentence. I

feel that the sentence is the natural unit of the poem. Sometimes I divide it immediately before or after the part of a sentence. If you do it precisely after a part of a sentence, that creates a feeling of calmness, whereas if you interrupt natural breathing, that creates a different tempo.”

When does a sentence fit a line?

“I rely a bit on what feels right. At a certain moment, the line is full and starts to exceed the ‘normal’ breadth of the poem, no matter how variable that is.”

In the first verse you write about what is present in its ‘day-to-dayness’. Is that the same as its ‘everydayness’?

“Everydayness means roughly ‘ordinariness’. That aspect of ordinariness I want to retain, but in ‘everyday’ you heard the word ‘day’ less, because it is a threadbare word. ‘Day-to-dayness’ has more obviously to do with time.”

The word ‘dwell’ has a temporary aspect, even though things are there every day.

“But it is no permanent state, because the present is temporary. Like us, it is only there for a little while. That is the beauty of the verb ‘to dwell’, since it actually means ‘to remain temporarily’ – there is something paradoxical about the word itself.”

‘Step by step’ sounds completely literal. Is the intended meaning: gradually, little by little?

“I think really that everything that happens does so in steps, in tiny jerks. I’m not a great believer in gradual developments. When I look at things, I experience a kind of rhythm in events. Everything that changes does so step by step.”

How does anyone leave memory in the lurch?

“Normally you say that memory leaves you in the lurch, but you could also say that you leave memory in the lurch. I think that expresses more accurately what is actually the case. It’s odd to say: memory leaves me in the lurch. As if something happens to you because memory suddenly abandons you of its own accord. Memory is an awkward concept, because we don’t exactly know what it is. It can very well still be there, even though it has left you – or you it – in the lurch. Perhaps you are just unable to make contact with it any more.”

The next line would seem to imply that memory is the same as yourself

“That is what’s so crazy: what you are yourself, your memory is too. The two are so closely connected to each other – memory and identity. Memory changes from one second to the next, as you do yourself. That’s the annoying thing about words like this – they suggest that something is laid down.”

The poem is completely in the infinite. Is that to suggest an imperative: ‘act like this’, or is it a supposition – or something else?

“The intention is: you can imagine that it is like this. If someone were to ask in a test: ‘What is the main idea of this text?’, then it is ‘leaving memory in the lurch’. By means of this grammatical form, you have considerable freedom as to how you can think about it. You can think ‘that is a lovely prospect’, but also ‘that is a terrible event’. I like that freedom.”

The poem also becomes more abstract since there is no subject, no I or he or you in it.

“Yes, it is a bit abstract. But I think that if a reader really reads the poem, he himself is also the subject of that text. It’s possible to insert an I or a he and hope that the reader will then identify himself with it, but I also like not doing that. Besides, it is also quite difficult to write something like this in the I-form.”

Why do these two lines (lines 4 and 5) make up a whole verse?

“Because the subordinate clause that follows is a long one, and is a more explicit explanation of ‘that are being worn down there’. That line of white space enables deceleration to take place. Then comes the more exact elaboration. By means of this, the text at this point gives you the feeling of thinking out loud. Something similar happens in the following verse too, the ‘clouds of dust’ are elaborated into ‘hot desert sand’. This gives the text a kind of lethargy and a kind of tenacity. Although there is resumption, there is also development, one that takes place step by step. You could say that the dividing into verses reflects this step-wise development.”

You write that the things ‘with’ their wearing down allow day-to-dayness to exist. Not ‘through’ their wearing down.

“Things dwell in day-to-dayness and because of the fact that they dwell there, day-to-dayness exists. And since things happen to wear down, day-to-dayness also consists of this wearing down. It is a kind of identification of those two things. ‘Through’ stresses a causal link, and all I wanted to say was that there is a connection.”

You talk about a rhythm, and that it is strange.

“As I’ve mentioned, I think that everything goes in steps, but that is hardly perceptible. That is why I refer to it as ‘strange’. The word ‘strange’ contains the meanings ‘odd, singular’ but also ‘self-willed, autonomous’. What I am saying here is that the rhythm is peculiar, but that it also has its own existence. Everything wears down, but that rhythm is what lasts.”

And then you suddenly let entire offices wear down

“Once you’ve gone so far with all those abstractions – ‘things’ and ‘memory’ – you’ve got to have an image. And those bookcases full of books, which also have something to do with archives, probably led by association to office and office furniture.”

And those clouds of dust led in turn to hot desert sand?

“Yes. Clouds of dust led me immediately to think of a desert, and the repeating sounds are nice when read aloud. When I write something, I also want it to sound good. If you write that they change ‘into clouds of dust, into desert sand’, something is missing – musicality demands something in between. In this case my choice was ‘hot’. And then of course there are the mirages. It is a representation of how the whole world changes into clouds of dust that shimmer in the heat – the poem is just as lethargic on the one hand as it is wild on the other.”

You take great steps here, from office to desert, to rivers, to new housing estates

“Those steps are actually taken. New housing estates are made out of dust, out of material that has already once done service, from clay that has settled on the river bed. The world

consists of deserts and rivers, but also of offices and new housing estates. The one is connected to the other.”

In the following line you combine two irreconcilable concepts, necessity and chance, with the word ‘and’.

“I doubt the importance of the difference. I think that there is also a pattern in chance. There is also mischief or pleasure involved in saying things that are not possible. In thought they are separate entities, but in my normal everyday existence I do not ask myself if something is of necessity or a matter of chance.”

What is ‘the beginning of thought’?

“Thought is handling memory, and at the same time memory has to be filled by thought. Thought and memory are dependent on each other. There was once a beginning when there was still nothing in the memory. Which means you can say: so there wasn’t yet thought itself.”

It is, to put it banally, a chicken-and-egg question?

“Yes, it certainly sounds highly banal, but it happens to be like that. The whole text is a result of my puzzling about memory, thought and the passage of time. Those are three things that cannot exist independently of each other. Leaving your memory in the lurch can occur in various ways: when you are old you see some old people quite literally return to the beginning, but also for example when you fall asleep, when you stop thinking. You can see this poem as a description of the temporariness of life, but also of what happens when you fall asleep.”

Source: Marjoleine de Vos, *Conversations with poets* (Prometheus/NRC Handelsblad 2005).