

Speech for ArchipelpoëZie unveiling—July 5, 2013—by Gudrun Will

Thank you so much, Ruth, and hello, everybody:

About a year and a half after I first moved here to De Archipel—I live in the Paramaribostraat, just over there—I was intrigued to find that a short Dutch poem, in elegant script, had suddenly appeared on a wall at the entrance to the Surinamestraat. What was it doing there? I wondered. I went out with my camera the next day and took a picture so that I could decipher it at my desk at home, where I would have my dictionary at hand, if necessary.

It was my first introduction to a contemporary Dutch poet—in this case, Rutger Kopland, who, it turned out, had just passed away—and I was both delighted and moved by the poem. Although I enjoyed it often as I passed by, I got used to it being there, and didn't think too much more about it until a few months later, when—bingo—another Dutch poem appeared at the *other* end of the Surinamestraat. It was another charmer, but one that made me ponder Dutch multiculturalism as well as smile. That one was by Hans Andreus.

The appearance of this second poem, also presented in elegant script, motivated me to go to the Internet, where I learned about ArchipelpoëZie, the fine literary project whose wonderful progression through our neighbourhood we are witnessing today. I'm very honoured to have been asked to introduce this latest gem by the late American poet, novelist, essayist and playwright William Carlos Williams. It is truly a delight. Its subject matter also seems especially appropriate to the Bankastraat, where many of us do our daily grocery shopping. The local shops may experience a sudden run on plums!

Although I'm a Canadian, I came across this poem in an English Literature class during my early years at university. I'm guessing it's part of the basic literary syllabus across the North American continent—and maybe in the UK as well—and I think the fact that it is quite well known helps it to achieve its purpose here, which is to make expats feel just that little bit more at home. I know this was the intent of the ArchipelpoëZie founders: to make their project inclusive in a neighbourhood that many English-speaking expats call home—even if only for a few years. And we *are* grateful. It certainly gave me a warm little feeling, to see that a wall poem in Den Haag could take me back a few decades to my undergrad days.

I want to tell you a little bit about the poet, William Carlos Williams. He was a medical doctor as well as a writer all of his life, and he was born, lived and practiced in the state of New Jersey. His dates are 1883 to 1963, so he lived to the age of 80. In the early 20th century he befriended the poet Ezra Pound, who helped him to get published in England, which was important for professional recognition at the time. He was very influenced by Pound's ideas and became a part of what is known as the Imagist movement.

These were poets, working in free verse, who believed in using the language of common speech, and who were devoted to a clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images and an economy of language. And yet, after a while, Williams became disenchanted with the Imagists, whom he felt were too wedded to European traditions. He preferred colloquial, natural, idiomatic American language and everyday subject matter, and I think you will agree that this poem on our wall is a grand example of these principles.

Williams became a key player in American Modernist poetry—his mantra was “not ideas but things.” You may know one of his most anthologized poems that describes, quite simply, a wheelbarrow, and yet manages to convey profundity. Williams’ work gained even more attention in the 1950s and 60s, when he was hailed by the Beat poets—Alan Ginsburg, for one, whom Williams had personally mentored. This younger generation praised him for the accessibility of his work, as well as for his openness to fostering newer poets.

I also want to draw your attention to the typography in which this poem has been printed on the wall. The font is called The Mix, part of the Thesis superfamily, and is the work of Dutch type designer Luc(as) de Groot. First released in 1994, it combines excellent legibility with a youthful and unorthodox character. It became the corporate typeface of many institutions and organizations, and performs extremely well in logos and advertising, often used in campaigns geared to a younger audience.

I hope you will all enjoy De Archipel’s growing circuit of poems, both in Dutch and in English, as much as I have. Many thanks to the ArchipelpoëZie members for injecting an extra dose of wonderment, in the form of literature and design, into our daily lives.

Ik dank u voor uw aandacht.