Gerrit Kouwenaar is rated among the most influential Dutch poets of the post-war era. His oeuvre by now comprises close to eight hundred pages of poetry (most of it collected in two volumes, covering the periods 1948-1978 and 1978-1996), three novels, and a vast number of translations, mostly of plays (by Brecht, Goethe, Schiller, Taylor, Sartre, Dürrenmatt and others). His outstanding position in Dutch letters has earned him numerous awards and his work has been the subject of many dissertations, of monographies and film documentaries – he has, one might say, gathered a following. It is indeed no exaggeration to say that the poetic landscape in the Netherlands would have been different without his work.

A main characteristic of Kouwenaar’s poems is that they emphatically manifest themselves as ‘things made of language’. Poetry is made of words, not thoughts, or feelings, or whatever else. Notwithstanding this principle, his poems are often capable of stirring extremely deep emotions in the reader through the mere action of language and words, as demonstrated in his latest collection *totaal witte kamer* (totally white room), which is, in part, a requiem for his late wife. Kouwenaar’s intensive use of what could be termed the entire ‘field of meaning’ of words and expressions causes his poems to approach as closely as possible the almost ‘bodily reality’, or what he himself likes to call ‘the flesh’. In Kouwenaar’s verse, the flesh is made word. In addition to this, Kouwenaar’s linguistic investigations of what is the passage of time and what are its effects, are without parallel. In the language of the poem the transient and ephemeral is made present and fixed in time, and is thereby preserved.

Gerrit Kouwenaar (b. 1923) is also known as ‘the grand old man of Dutch poetry’. His first (illicit) publications appeared during World War II. After the war he worked as a translator, writer and journalist. He was a member of the 50s Movement (Vijftigers): the significant group of poets that sent Dutch poetry in a new direction. He received many prizes for his poetry and translations, such as the P.C. Hooft Prize (1970), the Flemish-Dutch Prize for Dutch Letters (1989) and the VSB Poetry Prize (1997). In 1998 both his new collected poems (1978-1996), entitled *helder maar grijzer* (clear but greyer), appeared and a new volume, *een glas om te breken* (a glass to break). His most recent volume, *totaal witte kamer* (totally white room), was published in 2002.

Yet there are also poets whose endurance has proved a blessing to literature. Gerrit Kouwenaar has written, ever since he found his form twenty years ago, the same poem over and over, but this has rendered masterful works of art in every instance in which fifty years of craftsmanship serve as, for want of a better word, wisdom.

**Piet Gerbrandy in De Volkskrant**

The idea that Kouwenaar is an impassive word mongerer is once again convincingly dispelled with this new volume. He is a highly skilful poet who undoubtedly considers every word coolly, but in this way manages to also blend in emotions that come into their own in this controlled, strict environment.

**Peter de Boer in Trouw**

You can’t use poems to smash windows

**Gerrit Kouwenaar**
A review of Gerrit Kouwenaar’s *totally white room*

“I have been built for humans”
by Rob Schouten

*Translated by R. Vatter-Buck; poems translated by John Irons*

One evening, about ten years ago, I was standing at the bar during the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam with the Dutch poet Bert Schierbeek.

We were discussing one of his pieces, which I don’t rightly recall any longer: I, I am, I am nothing. Or something to that effect. To be honest, I thought it no more than hollow, rhetorical emptiness, bare nonsense and he was probably well aware that I thought so. Why so bare and barren? ‘What else could I say?’ explained Schierbeek, ‘I’d just lost my wife’. And it suddenly dawned on me: bareness as an expression of the highly emotional. Yes, that was it. Schubert’s *Winterreise*.

But at what point had I missed the link between the minimal, bare, purified text and an emotional and human event? I suddenly realised I was a child of the greatest division in Dutch post-war poetry, that between the ‘ordinary’ accessible, psychologising poetry of human happiness and human failings on one hand and the hermetic, autonomistic, impersonal, bare and white poetry on the other. Anyone belonging to one side was not allowed to venture into the others’ territory, it was so cut and dried. This pigeonholing mentality ran like the Berlin Wall through the middle of Dutch poetry.

In their essays and reviews, followers of the ‘hermetic’ school, such as Wiel Kusters and Peter Nijmeijer, ignored or criticised what they called ‘anecdotal’ poetry. And in the opposing camp, they slated what they referred to as ‘white’ poetry. On reading the collection *entirely perfect inedible peach*, for example, the Dutch poet Benno Barnard called its writer the ‘entirely perfect unreadable Gerrit’. Not terribly witty, but it didn’t matter, it was clear: two more or less fundamentalist communities that wanted nothing to do with each other.

**Thing Poetry**

Kouwenaar, that was the guilty party, the Godfather of hermetic, impersonal poetry. Funnily enough, he came from the group that had once instigated the greatest revival in twentieth century poetry, the Vijftigers. Nevertheless, he was still primarily the writer of Thing Poetry, poetry of the inexpressible, anti-ostentation, abstraction. Borne off by his paladins and epigones and, perhaps against his will, appointed irrefutably as the head of the autonomic school. It was sometime in the nineteen sixties or seventies that an old philosophical notion of the insufficiency of language reached the Netherlands. Leibnitz, Nietzsche and, subsequently, Wittgenstein, had long agreed that there was a great
deal that could not be expressed properly using language. The Dutch novelist W.F. Hermans had presented Wittgenstein’s philosophy in the popular form of the novel (*The Dark Room of Damocles*, for example), while, elsewhere, the nouveau novel had wreaked its vengeance on gratuitously garrulous authors. This suspicion regarding language as a means of communication finally infiltrated Dutch poetry, the last bastion where one might still have thought it possible to issue communicative and meaningful utterances.

Perhaps the need in those days for bare, unsentimental poetry also had something to do with the urge of the liberalised generation of the sixties and seventies to overthrow the compromising, woolly language of the previous generation of political and social leaders. I can’t be sure, but sometimes it seems as if the new poetry also implied a political choice. In any event, something like an autonomic trend emerged in poetry, towards poems that only dared refer to themselves. And at the fore was Kouwenaar.

It is all over now. The wall appears to have fallen and we can look back indulgently at the past philosophical power struggle. And the funny thing is, there appears to be little to justify Kouwenaar’s position at the head of this guild of cool hermetics. Admittedly, his poetry may look impersonal, it makes a rigid, sometimes even mathematical impression; he once wrote a poem under the title, borrowed from Wittgenstein, ‘on the inexpressible’. He also appears to have suppressed any form of melancholy, but all the same, something doesn’t ring true. Even if he gives the impression of having wanted to write Thing Poetry, he nevertheless fails to meet the demands of his own ‘ideology’. Perhaps a verse entitled, ‘like a thing’, indicates why one may have been misled. The first line reads, ‘A poem like a thing’, after which it is compared to all kinds of things (revolving glass doors, a starched dinner jacket, an aeroplane, etc.), but nowhere does it say that a poem is a thing. On the contrary, it is only compared with it, using an age-old, fine, poetical like-comparison.

In another poetical poem, entitled, ‘take a poem, for example’, one does, indeed, detect an attempt at impersonality: ‘One plants/A garden where there was nothing/Thinks in it I/Master any finite form, I’. Kouwenaar would, perhaps, like to do so, but at the same time he doesn’t actually do it; the ‘I’ stands up straight in this poem, stressed, in fact, by its place at the end of the line. And a poem called, ‘on the inexpressible’ does exactly that, express the inexpressible. It would appear that Kouwenaar is occupied far more with expressing fundamental paradoxes; wanting to remain silent but unable to do so, being an autonomous thing but needing the personal to do so; wiping out the personal but needing the personal to do so.

Kouwenaar is, in this inescapable contradiction of himself, far more amusing and lighter a poet than one might think; he might pass for elliptical and taciturn, while also bandying with isolated remarks from everyday language: ‘Enough has been said now/About what they call desperation’, ‘I bow to gravity’, ‘The art of poetry/Sometimes it is useful to expand on it’, writing is ‘something to do with
thinking’ and even, ‘I’ll probably have to hit the sack soon’. Not infrequently, such isolated phrases touch on something quite essential, which appeals to him and on which he embroiders. The title of the poem, ‘that’s all’, for example, sounds simultaneously loose and rigid; it is a throwaway gesture, but also has something philosophical to say; the singular is the whole. Or take the phrase, ‘I am/Say such a country’. That, too, sounds conversational, but at the same time makes a division between ‘am’ and ‘say’, between being and speaking, between the personal and the poetical.

The fact that Kouwenaar’s work sometimes makes such a cool, analytical impression is because it lends itself so well to dissection and explanation by the analytical scalpel (as the Dutch poet and academic Wiel Kusters and other exegetes exhaustively demonstrate). It’s easy meat for the poetry pathologists. The question is, however, whether it is, in fact, so anatomically constructed. Personally, I believe that when you open up Kouwenaar’s work, you come across far more vibrancy and emotion than is often assumed.

**totally white room**

His latest collection, *totally white room*, demonstrates as much. Indisputably yet another bare, estranged title, like those he has already produced so many of, in the genre of ‘entirely perfect inedible peach’, ‘inexpressible earth’, or ‘the unfathomable map’. All uninviting, un-encouraging titles. All the same, *totally white room* directly suggests anything and everything. One thinks of a sickroom, an entirely empty room, perhaps, the rigidity of design, or something with snow; the Winterreise home. And they are, indeed, mourning poems; there is no need to read the explanation of the text for that, mourning for the death of a loved one, but without sentiment or grief. Cold, perhaps, but, as with Schierbeek at that time, the circumstances engender such coldness. Take the first poem, ‘a waning day’:

> It could only come from the fact that one already knew everything, that grass sulked everywhere where it was forbidden, that the full-fledged hedge shut out the view, the axe had to be sharpened

> that on a waning day one reviewed the distance that the distance was closer than ever that one had forgotten the year of the day that the house had outlived and estranged itself

> that one broke into one’s entrails, the unslept-in bed lay ready, the room had been emptied once more saw oneself for ever for the first time
and that one felt cold and ate meat
and that the meat no longer had any taste and the fire
ignited itself and the walls warmed themselves

A wonderful poem in my view, both complex and transparent. It begins with such
a characteristic Kouwenaar opening, nonchalant almost, but also a little
foreboding with the discovery that there will be nothing new any more and that
one lives in a garden where no more ‘grass’ (green, youth) will grow and around
which a high hedge now stands, which shuts out the view of the world and must
ultimately be cut down.

The twilight years (following stanza) in which one reviews one’s youth,
realising that what was once far away (the future) is now closer than ever; that
you remember a certain day so well, but no longer the year and that there is a
house where you have lived almost too long and which has become your own, but
the words for it do not sound nice: ‘outlived’ and ‘estranged’, almost make it
sound like misuse.

And the third stanza, where the room is empty again, as before you move in,
so that by way of a recollection of that empty state one, ‘once more saw oneself
for ever for the first time’. The fact that you feel cold (last stanza) and your food
has lost its taste but that a fire ignites itself, warming everything. Perhaps that fire
in the last lines poses the reader with a riddle in a poem that deals, more than
anything, with coldness, loneliness and loss, but it nonetheless seems appropriate.
It reminds one of a crematorium and also of the consumption of everything:
house and heart.

You can explain such a poem far more precisely, referring to other instances in
Kouwenaar’s works or elsewhere, but the essence is clear. No emotional poetry
for obituaries, but solid poetry founded on heavy, albeit sublimated emotion.

Cryptogram
In his poems, Kouwenaar primarily opposes metaphysics and the consolation of
higher things. He is extremely elementary and worldly. ‘I’m too human to fly,’ he
once wrote. He attempts to waive the distinction between body and soul: ‘My
soul is so fleshy that I have to eat’. You eat with the same organ with which you
speak and so Kouwenaar consumes reality, only to excrete it again. There is
something of the House That Jack Built about his poems. They are all addition
sums and repetitions of all the things you have to experience and assimilate.
Some are also a little like nursery rhymes, like the apt, ‘a happy childhood’:

Do you sometimes forget to wind up your father’s clock?
yes, I sometimes forget to forget my father’s time

do you sometimes wear a straw hat an eye patch a stand-up collar?
no, I celebrate a poem, a summer of gold leaf
do you sometimes write to put the last lips into words?
yes, I decipher a kiss of muddied roses

do you sometimes run through grass that badly needs mowing?
no, I stand still in grass that no one’s been sowing

At first sight, it seems as if the questions have not been properly understood; after all the answers do not match up entirely, which incidentally strengthens the impression of dipping and skipping rhymes, which do not necessarily have to be logical, either. But appearances can be deceptive. If you ‘unravel’ the sum, then you come up with the following ‘solution’ for the first stanza. If you forget to wind your father’s clock (an outmoded pastime, it seems to me) then you ensure that time stands still and you therefore don’t (you forget to) do what progress dictates and forget the past.

It sometimes requires an effort to ‘understand’ Kouwenaar’s poems; they do not give up their secrets willingly. You seldom, however, come across an impossibly tangled knot. It is all a little like a cryptogram. The better you get to know their creator, the easier it becomes to solve the riddles. And so you discover that the totally white room from the title is not just a room in a house, but perhaps also the human body and certainly the poem itself.

All those ideas are brought together in ‘stone poem’, another verse from Kouwenaar’s latest collection. Again a poem with a rigid title and housed in a seemingly immovable dwelling (it was commissioned, incidentally, for a real building on Panamalaan in Amsterdam and can also be admired there, R.S.). But it is in the final lines, perhaps, that one gets to know the creator the best:

stone poem

I lie like a ship at anchor
off a city centuries old

I am moored to a present
but wear a past name

I dwell here between my walls
like humans inside their skins

space gazes out of my windows
I have been built for humans

However cool and distanced Kouwenaar’s work may sometimes come across, it does not deny that it is created for humans.
Poems by Gerrit Kouwenaar
(Amsterdam: Querido)
Translated by Lloyd Haft

From helder maar grijzer; clear but greyer, 1998:
a smell of burnt feathers
inedible
not far from the road
1890: 27-29 July*
illegible*
three damsels returned
farewell
Eat some more of this beautiful
one must
look, there’s been some wind
local time
time’s still open*

*): ‘1890: 27-29 July’, ‘illegible’ and ‘time’s still open’ were previously published in English in In a different light. Fourteen contemporary dutch-language poets, Seren 2002.

From totaal witte kamer; totally white room, 2002:
totally white room
so it’s a peaceful evening
a happy childhood
when we
poème, lancôme
a smell of burnt feathers

One comes home, it's march, one opens up
the wintered house, absence and lack
have knotted webs, consumed freeloaders, driven
the owl through the chimney to death

the floor full of helpless down, the books
shit chalk-white, the glasses in smithers
on the eternal bed a tidy carcass
with huge wings

what did one do today?
picked up branches, bewailed the withering
elderberry, fuelled a fire with trash –
inedible

This is while one is elsewhere, no eye
has seen this that isn't closed

one hovers above the orchard without feathers
one weighs a spirit, what shall the owl eat now

time reduces sight, chute with no bottom
hunger denies a word that means nothing

the trees stand emptied under their nests, no egg
shall still break out in decay, from blast furnaces
some breath still comes, the inedible silver
consumes the light, in a manner of still speaking –
not far from the road

Discover the moment, it’s empty, it’s not far
from the edge of the road, there’s nothing behind

the hedge around it so reject its rhyme, break clean
off the docile journey, take over vacancy, occupy

fill in the prospect with stone, man-make light, digest
what ate oneself out of, have nerve for decay

evict eating, have forgetting, re
call no way out, be arrived, weigh nothing

but the lead one mimics, while
folding one’s wings open shut while –
1890: 27-29 July

It didn’t work, one walks the road back, running
down like a clock, and shall today lay

upon the bed what’s oozing, a straightjacket around
a blood vessel, not much throbs, one had expected

it to liberate, cleanse, spirit
clarified in void, form of bread

but nothing, just that colour, red as a doornail, decay
that kept returning home, dead end

one leaves the room with oneself, one is
myself, above it crows, paint –
illegible

Stasis teems, white, why, in what depth
must one see this to ground oneself, dig
to be here and now, future that wanted flesh
and got it wrong, dug-up shovel
sickle and stonesquare practically rooted, echo
chewed over by teeth that always, no words
other than this the intended, gadfly spring sedge
bloodpeach chokepear nightingales, perfect
on this paper that’s now getting rained on, now
blowing dry again, date, rest illegible –
three damsels returned

One got up late, summer hangs heavily
down from the sky, even the smells are purpler

one has gone into the orchard, sees there
three damsels, naked, as if they were there

among the fallen fruit they sing what’s beyond
all senses, throatweed that rewords itself

as pollen, milk of roses, worms
looking for letters, lilies, nearly lilies still –
farewell

Something falters, one has smoked too much, flees
 coughing into the orchard, autumn breathes

narrowly, silent as a bed this is, it’s silent
 a mouth, only the snails on dead wood move

one would like to keep sitting here on a stone
 for hours or centuries, living on a brimming

cup left behind when summer flesh and spirit
 in hoarse three-part choir mortalized themselves –
Eat some more of all this beautiful
ever-replaceable among-us
and drink, take it in, digest it

now that the flesh ever more familiarly expropriates
itself in the mirror, language stray off'
where it came from, time ever quicker
catching up with, putting off itself

perfect like it never was
satisfied as swallowed water
it is now, too –
one must

One still has to count one’s summers, pass one’s sentence, snow one’s winter

one still has to get the shopping done before dark asks the way, black candles for the cellar

one still has to give the sons a pep talk, measure the daughters for their suits of armour, teach ice water to boil

one still has to show the photographer the pool of blood get unused to one’s house, change one’s typewriter ribbon

one still has to dig a hole for a butterfly trade the moment for one’s father’s watch –
***

look, there’s been some wind

on the windless little square
there were green leaves that didn’t belong there

it was a summer like it was supposed to be
total as the war that raged somewhere else

while the city lay dreaming like a bomb
it wasn’t said there’d been a dream that wasn’t dreaming

something to scare you, in words, while
the river flowed on past friends

they talked about grammar tooth decay and
the soon-to-die, judged how far to the calm other side

praised the day till deep in the dark, it was
like it had always been –
local time

Night takes place, time’s a full circle
one tastes the ripe word melon
warm as the cooled-off ground
and on the edge of decay

if one hides away in flesh
the moment serves an eau-de-vie
a guest must not let on he’s gone,
jelled into spirit

summer’s already shivering with fall
night has the gall for what’s motionless
the pedestrians overpass is paved with felt
still as a mouse the owl turns volatile –
time’s still open

Time’s still open, there’s wheezing at both ends
like evening and darkness embracing, sleeping
till the hoary orchard cracks, pregnant
with flawed fruits gallnuts worms

in the house breath, dates moaning
that the nightshade hangs by its life
that the sower sprouts in his cot
that the green words go bad like cherries

flashes of today, the questions, sighing
of the low once-only trees for a long total
merciful summer, for fall, for winter –
totally white room

Let’s make the room white one more time
one more time the totally white room, you, me

it won’t save time, but one more time
make the room white, now, never again later

almost echoing perfection
our lines more white than legible

so one more time that room, once and for all total
the way we lay there, lie, shall lie there
more white than, together –
so it’s a peaceful evening

While the last poem eats up the moment
the maker stands up drained from the table
he cleans his carving knife and looks out of the window

on the flagstones the leaves breathing their last
relieved of their summer, the angel in the wind crouching
in the eternal weeds for time

so it’s a peaceful evening of wars and farewells
world, truth and love comprising invulnerably
their iron letters

and now for something edible, blood pudding white bread
and then to sleep at last, black’s in style –
a happy childhood

Do you ever forget to wind your father’s clock?
yes, I do forget to forget my father’s time

doyoueverputonastrawhat,eyepatch,stand-upcollar?
no,whatIperformisaspoem,asummerinbeatengold

doyoueverwrite-thelastlippstobeworded?
yes,Idecipherakissfrommud-spatteredroses

do you ever walk through grass that could use mowing?
no,I’mstandingstillingrassnosoneowed–
when we

When we brushed our hands over our hearts
remember? how right it sounded, how our halves
clicked again true, words by candlelight

and us lying translated, spelled in old flesh
breath lifting us away, straw fire ignited us

happiness hung like smoke about us, outside
the minor cold of autumn, we were satisfied

so laid-out in our havings when the moment
its arms still around us fell into time

one still hears a ticking behind the whitewash, hollow
slowly falling mildewy black drops –
poème, lancôme

The leaving behind, the forgotten, the things
that yield speechlessly, the insightful
the fugitive, the remnant

while the poem dries up, re-reads itself
through the glass of the mind one gets one’s number
the cut-off smell of perfection in its void

one must get out of one’s senses now with eyes by the mouthful
count, halve oneself, grow volatile in postscript
pale away in daylight, waste away in underwear

so one can leave oneself behind, thinner and littler
outwardly the point in time, so one can lay oneself aside
in eaten-into food, as language loosens –